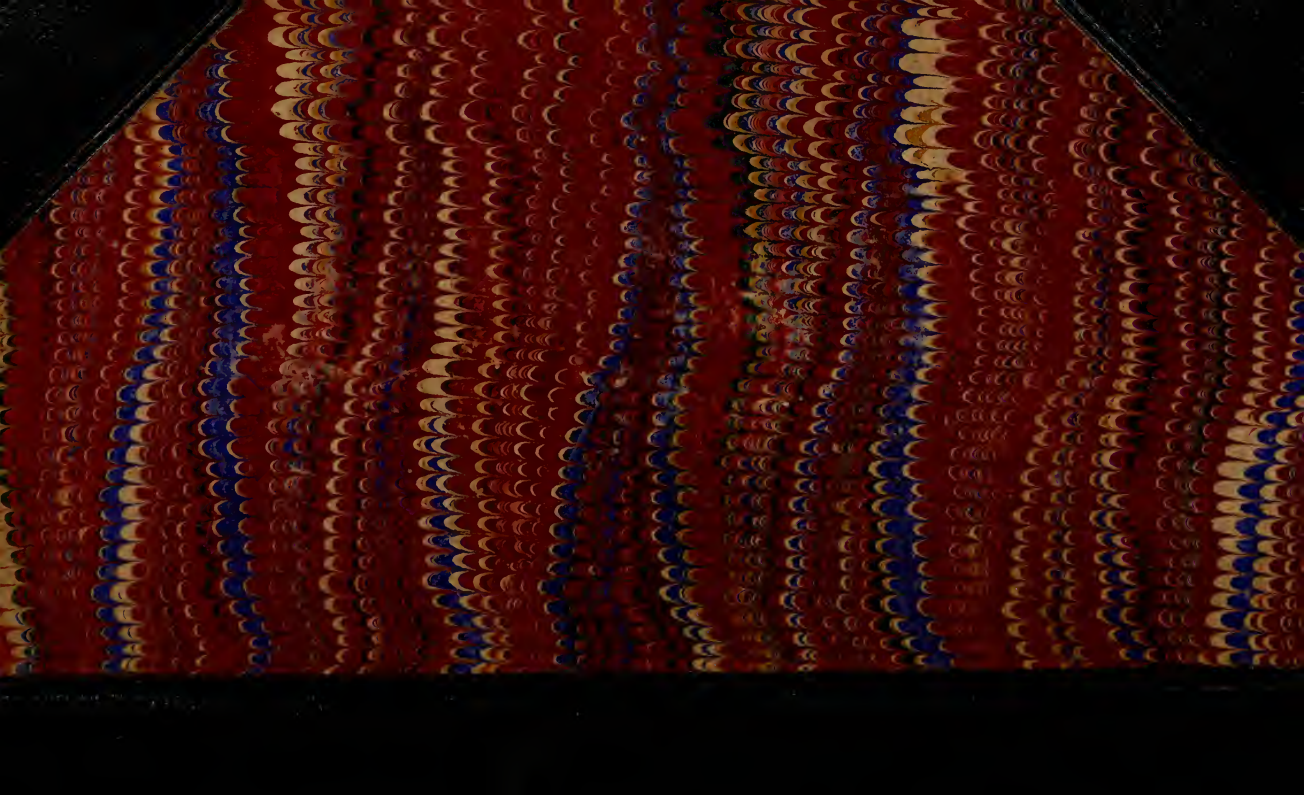

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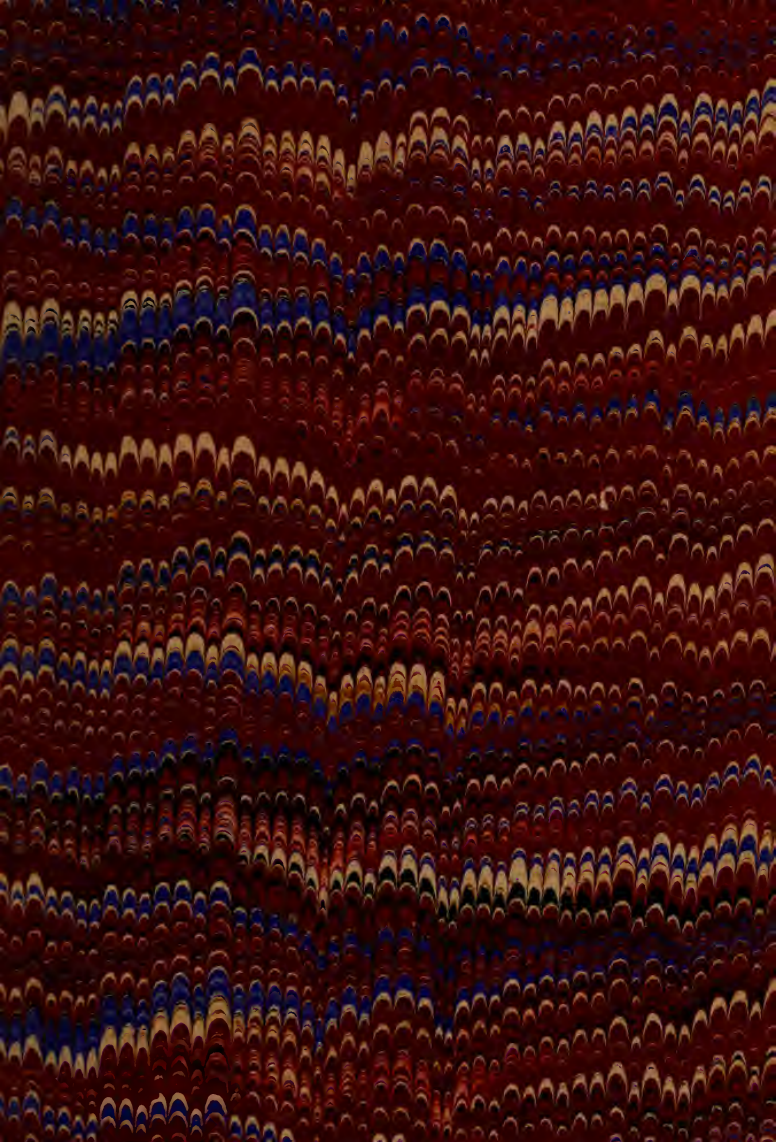

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CERISE

A TALE OF THE LAST CENTURY.

BY

G. J. WHYTE MELVILLE,

AUTHOR OF

"THE GLADIATORS," "DIGBY GRAND," "THE BROOKES OF BRIDLEMERE," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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CERISE:

A TALE OF THE LAST CENTURY.

CHAPTER I.

THE DAISY CHAIN.

N the gardens of Versailles, as everywhere else within the freezing influence of the *Grand Monarque,* nature herself seemed to accept the situation, and succumbed inevitably under the chain of order and courtly etiquette. The grass grew, indeed, and the Great Waters played, but the former was rigorously limited to certain mathematical patches, and permitted only to attain an established length, while the latter threw their diamond showers against the sky, with the regular and oppressive

monotony of clockwork. The avenues stretched away straight and stiff like rows of lately-built houses; the shrubs stood hard and defiant as the white statues with which they alternated, and the very sunshine off the blinding gravel glared and scorched as if its duty were but to mark a march of dazzling hours on square stone dials for the kings of France.

Down in Touraine the woods were sleeping, hushed, and peaceful in the glowing summer's day, sighing, as it were, and stirring in their repose, while the breeze crept through their shadows, and quivered in their outskirts, ere it passed on to cool the peasant's brow, toiling contented in his clearing, with blue home-spun garb, white teeth, and honest sunburnt face.

Far off in Normandy, sleek of skin and rich of colour, cows were ruminating knee-deep in pasturage; hedges were loaded with wild flowers, thickets dark with rank luxuriance of growth; while fresh streams, over which the blue kingfisher flitted like a dragon-fly, rippled merrily down towards the sea, through teeming orchards, between waving corn-fields, past convent-walls grown over with woodbine and lilac and laburnum, under stately churches, rearing Gothic spires, deli-

cate as needlework, to heaven, and bringing with them a cool current of air, a sense of freedom and refreshment as they hurried past. Nay, even where the ripening sun beat fiercely on the vineyards, terraced tier upon tier, to concentrate his rays—where Macon and Côte-d'Or were already tinged with the first faint blush of their coming vintage, even amidst the grape-rows so orderly planted and so carefully trained—buxom peasant-girls could gather posies of wild flowers for their raven hair, to make their black eyes sparkle with merrier glances, and their dusky cheeks mantle in rich carnation, type of southern blood dancing through their veins.

But Versailles was not France, and at Versailles nothing seemed free but the birds and the children.

One of the alleys, commanded from the king's private apartments, was thickly crowded with loungers. Courtiers in silk stockings, laced coats, and embroidered waistcoats reaching to their thighs, wearing diamond-hilts on their rapiers, and diamond-buckles in their shoes, could not move a step without apology for catching in the spreading skirts of magnificent ladies, magnificent, be it understood, in gorgeousness of apparel rather than

in beauty of face or symmetry of figure. The former, indeed, whatever might be its natural advantages, was usually coated with paint and spotted with patches, while the latter was so disguised by voluminous robes, looped-up skirts, falling laces, and such outworks and appendages, not to mention a superstructure of hair, ribbon, and other materials, towering so high above the head as to place a short woman's face somewhere about the middle of her whole altitude, that it must have been difficult even for the maid who dressed her to identify, in one of these imposing triumphs of art, the slender and insignificant little framework on which the whole fabric had been raised. Devotion in woman is never more sublime than when sustaining the torture of dress.

It was all artificial together. Not a word was spoken but might have been overheard with entire satisfaction by the unseen sovereign who set the whole pageant in motion. Not a gesture but was restrained by the consciousness of supervision. Not a sentiment broached but had for its object the greater glorification of a little old man, feeble and worn out, eating iced fruit and sweetmeats in a closet opening from a formal, heavily-furnished, over-gilded saloon, that commanded the

broad gravel-walk on which the courtiers passed to and fro in a shifting, sparkling throng. If a compliment was paid by grinning gallant to simpering dame, it was offered and accepted with a sidelong glance from each towards the palace windows. If a countess whispered scandal to a duchess behind her fan, the grateful dish was sauced and flavoured for the master's palate, to whom it would be offered by the listener on the first opportunity. Marshals of a hundred fights tapped their jewelled snuff-boxes to inhale a pinch of the King's Mixture. Blooming beauties, whose every breath was fragrance, steeped their gossamer handkerchiefs in no other perfume than an extract from orange-flowers, called *Bouquet du Roi.*

For Louis the Fourteenth, if he might believe his household, Time was to stand still, and the Seasons brought no change. "I am the same age as everybody else," said a courtier of seventy to His Majesty at sixty-five. "The rain of Marly does not wet one," urged another as an excuse for not covering his head in a shower while walking with the king. By such gross flattery was that sovereign to be duped, who believed himself a match for the whole of Europe in perceptive wisdom and diplomatic *finesse.*

But though powdered heads were bowing, and laced hats waving, and brocades ruffling in the great walk, swallows skimmed and darted through the shades of a green alley behind the nearest fountain, and a little girl was sitting on the grass making daisy chains as busily as if there were no other interest, no other occupation at Court or in the world.

Her flapping hat was thrown aside, and her head bent studiously over her work, so that the brown curls, silken and rich and thick, as a girl's curls should be, hid all of her face but a little soft white brow. Her dimpled arms and hands moved nimbly about her task, and a pair of sturdy, well-turned legs were stuck out straight before her, as if she had established herself in her present position with a resolution not to stir till she had completed the long snowy chain that festooned already for several yards across the turf. She had just glanced in extreme content at its progress, without raising her head, when a spaniel scoured by, followed at speed by a young gentleman in a page's dress, who, skimming the level with his toe in all the impetuous haste of boyhood, caught the great work round his ankles, and tore it into a dozen fragments as he passed.

The little girl looked up in consternation, having duly arranged her face for a howl; but she controlled her feelings, partly in surprise, partly in bashfulness, partly perhaps in gratification at the very obvious approval with which the aggressor regarded that face, while, stopping short, he begged "Mademoiselle's pardon" with all the grand manner of the Court grafted on the natural politeness of France.

It was indeed a very pretty, and, more, a very loveable little face, with its large innocent blue eyes, its delicate peach-like cheeks, and a pair of curling ruddy lips, that, combined with her own infantine pronunciation of her baptismal name Thérèse, had already obtained for the child the familiar appellation of "Cerise."

"Pardon, mademoiselle!" repeated the page, colouring boy-like to his temples—"Pardon! I was running so fast; I was in such a hurry; I am so awkward. I will pick you a hatful more daisies—and—and—I can get you a large slice of cake this evening when the king goes out of the little supper-room to the music-hall."

"Mademoiselle" thus adjured, rose to her full stature of some forty inches, and spreading her short stiff skirt around her with great care, replied

by a stately reverence that would have done credit to an empress. Notwithstanding her dignita, however, she cast a wistful look at the broken daisy chain, while her little red lips quivered as if a burst of tears was not far off.

The boy was down on his knees in an instant, gathering handfuls of the simple flowers, and flinging them impetuously into his hat. It was obvious that this young gentleman possessed already considerable energy of character, and judging from the flash of his bold dark eyes, a determined will of his own. His figure, though as yet unformed, was lithe, erect, and active, while his noble bearing denoted self-reliance beyond his years, and a reckless, confident disposition, such as a true pedagogue would have longed and failed to check with the high hand of coercion. In a few minutes he had collected daisies enough to fill his laced hat to the rims, and flinging himself on the turf, began stringing them together with his strong, well-shaped, sunburnt fingers. The little girl, much consoled, had reseated herself as before. It was delightful to see the chain thus lengthening by fathoms at a time, and this new friend seemed to enter heart and soul into the important work. Active sympathy soon finds its way to

a child's heart; she nestled up to his side, and shaking her curls back, looked confidingly in his face.

"I like you," said the little woman, honestly, and without reserve. "You are good—you are polite—you make daisy chains as well as mamma. My name's Cerise. What's *your* name?"

The page smiled, and with the smile his whole countenance grew handsome. In repose, his face was simply that of a well-looking youth enough, with a bold, saucy expression and hardy sunburnt features; but when he smiled, a physiognomist watching the change would have pronounced, "That boy *must* be like his mother, and his mother *must* have been beautiful!"

"Cerise," repeated the lad. "What a pretty name! Mine is not a pretty name. Boys don't have pretty names. My name's George—George Hamilton. You mustn't call me Hamilton. I am never called anything but George at Court. I'm not big enough to be a soldier yet, but I am page to *Louis le Grand!*"

The child opened her eyes very wide, and stared over her new friend's head at a gentleman who was listening attentively to their conversation with his hat in his hand, and an expression of

considerable amusement pervading his old, worn, melancholy face.

This gentleman had stolen round the corner of the alley, treading softly on the turf, and might have been watching the children for some minutes unperceived. He was a small, shrunken, but well made person, with a symmetrical leg and foot, the arched instep of the latter increased by the high heels of his diamond-buckled shoes. His dress in those days of splendour was plain almost to affectation; it consisted of a full-skirted, light brown coat, ornamented only with a few gold buttons; breeches of the same colour, and a red satin waistcoat embroidered at the edges, the whole suit relieved by the *cordon bleu* which was worn outside. The hat he dangled in his pale thin unringed hand was trimmed with Spanish point, and had a plume of white feathers. His face was long, and bore a solemn, saddened expression, the more remarkable for the rapidity with which, as at present, it succeeded a transient gleam of mirth. Notwithstanding all its advantages of dress and manner, notwithstanding jewelled buckles, and point lace, and full flowing periwig, the figure now standing over the two children, in sad contrast to their rich flow of youth and health, was that of a

worn out, decrepit old man, fast approaching, though not yet actually touching, the brink of his grave.

The smile, however, came over his wrinkled face once more as the child looked shyly up, gathering her daisy chain distrustfully into her lap. Then he stooped to stroke her brown curls with his white wasted hand.

"Your name is Thérèse," said he, gravely. "Mamma calls you Cerise, because you are such a round, ruddy little thing. Mamma is waiting in the painted saloon for the king's dinner. You may look at him eating it, if your *bonne* takes you home past the square table in the middle window opposite the Great Fountain. She is to come for you in a quarter of an hour. You see I know all about it, little one."

Cerise stared in utter consternation, but at the first sound of that voice the boy had started to his feet, blushing furiously, and catching up his hat to upset an avalanche of daisies in the action, stood swinging it in his hand, bolt upright like a soldier who springs to "attention" under the eye of his officer. The old gentleman's face had resumed its sad expression, but he drew up his feeble figure with dignity, and motioned the lad, who already nearly equalled him in height, a little further back.

George obeyed instinctively, and Cerise, still sitting on the grass, with the daisy chain in her lap, looked from one to the other in a state of utter bewilderment.

"Don't be frightened, little one," continued the old gentleman, caressingly. "Come and play in these gardens whenever you like. Tell Le Notre to give you prettier flowers than these to make chains of, and when you get older, try to leave off turning the heads of my pages with your brown curls and cherry lips. As for you, sir," he added, facing round upon George, "I have seldom seen any of you so innocently employed. Take care of this pretty little girl till her *bonne* comes to fetch her, and show them both the place from whence they can see the king at dinner. How does the king dine to-day, sir? and when?" he concluded, in a sharper and sterner tone. George was equal to the occasion.

"There is no council to-day, sire," he answered, without hesitation. "His Majesty has ordered 'The Little Service'* this morning, and will dine in seventeen minutes exactly, for I hear the Grey Musketeers already relieving guard in the Front Court."

* Au petit couvert.

"Go, sir," exclaimed the old gentleman in great good humour. "You have learnt your duty better than I expected. I think I may trust you with the care of this pretty child. Few pages know anything of etiquette or the necessary routine of a Court. I am satisfied with you. Do you understand?"

The boy's cheeks flushed once more, as he bowed low and stood silent, whilst the old gentleman passed on. The latter, however, had not gone half-a-dozen paces ere he turned back, and again addressed the younger of the children.

"Do not forget, little one, to ask Le Notre for any flowers you want, and—and—if you think of it, tell mamma you met the honest *bourgeois* who owns these gardens, and that he knew you, and knew your name, and knew how old you were, and, I dare say little one, you are surprised the *bourgeois* should know so much!"

That Cerise was surprised admitted of small doubt. She had scarcely found her voice ere the old gentleman turned out of the alley and disappeared. Then she looked at her companion, whose cheeks were still glowing with excitement,

and presently burst into a peal of childish laughter.

"What a funny old man!" cried Cerise, clapping her hands; "and I am to have as many flowers as I like. What a funny old man!"

"Hush, mademoiselle," answered the boy, gravely, as though his own dignity had received a hurt, "You must not speak like that. It is very rude. It is very wrong. If a man were to say such things it should cost him his life."

Cerise opened her blue eyes wider than ever.

"Wrong!" she repeated. "Rude! What have I done? who is it, then?"

"It is the King!" answered the boy, proudly. "It is *Louis le Grand!*"

CHAPTER II.

THE MONTMIRAILS.

LADIES first. Let us identify the pretty little girl in the gardens of Versailles, who answered to the name of Cerise, before we account for the presence of George Hamilton the page.

It is a thing well understood—it is an arrangement universally conceded in France — that marriages should be contracted on principles of practical utility, rather than on the vague assumption of a romantic and unsuitable preference. It was therefore with tranquil acquiescence, and feelings perfectly under control, that Thérèse de La Fierté, daughter of a line of dukes, found herself taken out of a convent and wedded to a chivalrous veteran, who could scarcely stand long enough at

the altar, upon his well-shaped but infirm old legs, to make the necessary responses for the conversion of the beautiful *brunette* over against him into Madame la Marquise de Montmirail. The bridegroom was indeed infinitely more agitated than the bride. He had conducted several campaigns; he was a Marshal of France; he had even been married before, to a remarkably plain person, who adored him; he had undergone the necessary course of gallantry inflicted on men of his station at the Court, and in the society to which he belonged; nevertheless, as he said himself, he felt like a recruit in his first "affair," when he encountered the plunging fire of those black eyes, raking him front, and flanks, and centre, from under their bridal wreath and its drooping white lace veil.

Thérèse had indeed, in right of her mother, large black eyes, as well as large West Indian possessions; and her light-haired rivals were good enough to attribute the rich radiance of her beauty to a stain of negro blood somewhere far back in that mother's race.

Nevertheless, the old Marquis de Montmirail was really over head and ears in love with his brilliant bride. That he should have indulged her

in every whim and every folly was but reasonably to be expected; but that *she* should always have shown for *him* the warm affection of a wife, tempered by the deference and respect of a daughter, is only another instance, added to the long score on record, of woman's sympathy and right feeling when treated with gentleness and consideration.

Not even at Court did Madame de Montmirail give a single opportunity to the thousand tongues of scandal during her husband's lifetime; she was indeed notorious for sustaining the elaborate homage and tedious admiration of majesty itself, without betraying, by the flutter of an eyelash, that ambition was roused or vanity gratified during the ordeal. It seemed that she cared but for three people in the world. The chivalrous old wreck who had married her, and who was soon compelled to move about in a wheeled chair; the lovely little daughter born of their union, who inherited much of her mother's effective beauty with the traditional grace and delicate complexion of the handsome Montmirails, a combination that had helped to distinguish her by the appropriate name of Cerise; and the young Abbé Malletort, a distant cousin of her own, as

remarkable for shrewd intellect and utter want of sentiment as for symmetry of figure and signal ugliness of face. The Grand Monarque was not famous for consideration towards the nobles of his household. Long after the Marquis de Montmirail had commenced taking exercise on his own account in a chair, the king commanded his attendance at a shooting party, kept him standing for three-quarters of an hour on damp grass, under heavy rain, and dismissed him with a pompous compliment and an attack of gout driven upwards into the region of the stomach. The old courtier knew he had got his death blow. The old soldier faced it like an officer of France. He sent for Madame la Marquise, and complimented her on her *coiffure* before proceeding to business. He apologized for the pains that took off his attention at intervals, and bowed her out of the room, more than once, when the paroxysms became unbearable. The Marquise never went further than the door, where she fell on her knees in the passage and wept. He explained clearly enough how he had bequeathed to her all that was left of his dilapidated estates. Then he sent his duty to the king, observing that "He had served his Majesty under fire often, but never under water till now.

He feared it was the last occasion of presenting his homage to his sovereign." And so, asking for Cerise, who was brought in by her weeping mother, died brave and tranquil, with his arm round his child and a gold snuff-box in his hand.

Ladies cannot be expected to sorrow as inconsolably for a mate of seventy as for one of seven-and-twenty; but the Marquise de Montmirail grieved very honestly, nevertheless, and mourned during the prescribed period, with perhaps even more circumspection than had she lost a lover, as well as, or instead of a husband. Wagers were laid at Court that she would marry again within a year; yet the year passed by, and Madame had not so much as seen anybody but her child and its *bonne*. Even Malletort was excluded from her society; and that versatile ecclesiastic, though pluming himself on his knowledge of human nature, including its most inexplicable half, was obliged to confess he was at a loss.

"*Peste!*" he would observe, taking a pinch of snuff, and flicking the particles delicately off his ruffles. "Was not the sphinx a woman? At least down to the waist. So, I perceive, is the Marquise. What would you have? There is a

clue to every labyrinth, but it is not always worth while to puzzle it out."

After a time, when the established period for seclusion had expired, the widow, more beautiful than ever, made her appearance once more at Court. That she loved admiration there could not now be the slightest doubt, and the self-denial became at length apparent with which she had declined it during her husband's lifetime, that she might not wring his kind old heart. So, in all societies—at balls, at promenades, at concerts—at solemn attendances on the king, at tedious receptions of princes and princesses, dukes and duchesses, sons and daughters of majesty, legitimate or otherwise—she accepted homage with avidity, and returned compliment for compliment, and gallantry for gallantry, with a coquetry perfectly irresistible. But this was all; the first step was fatal taken by an admirer across that scarce perceptible boundary which divides the gold and silver grounds, the gaudy flower beds of flattery from the sweet wild violet banks of love. The first tremble of interest in his voice, the first quiver of diffidence in his glance, was the signal for dismissal.

Madame de Montmirail knew neither pity nor

remorse. She had the softest eyes, the smoothest skin, the sweetest voice in the bounds of France, but her heart was declared by all to be harder than the very diamonds that became her so well. Nor, though she seldom missed a chance of securing smiles and compliments, did she seem inclined to afford opportunity for advances of a more positive kind. Cerise was usually in her arms, or on her lap; and suitors of every time must have been constrained to admit that there is no *duenna* like a daughter. Besides, the child's beauty was of a nature so different from her mother's, that the most accomplished coxcomb found it difficult to word his admiration of mademoiselle so as to infer a yet stronger approval of madame herself. The slightest blunder, too, was as surely made public as it was quickly detected. The Marquise never denied herself or her friends an opportunity for a laugh, and her sarcasm was appropriate as pitiless; so to become a declared admirer of Madame de Montmirail required a good deal of that courage which is best conveyed by the word *sang-froid*.

And even for those reckless spirits, who neither feared the mother's wit nor respected the daughter's presence, there was yet another difficulty to encounter, in the person of the child's

bonne, a middle-aged quadroon to whom Cerise was ardently attached, and who never left her mistress's side when not employed in dressing or undressing her charge. This faithful retainer, originally a slave on the La Fierté estates, had passed — with lands, goods, and chattels — into the possession of the Marquise, after the death of her mother the duchess — who was said to have a black drop of blood in her veins — and immediately transferred her fidelity and affections to her present owner. She was a large, strong woman, with the remains of great beauty. Her age might be anything under fifty; and she was known at Court as "The Mother of Satan," a title she accepted with considerable gratification, and much preferred to the sweeter sounding name of Célandine, by which she was called on the West Indian estate and in the family of her proprietors.

Notwithstanding her good looks, there was something about Célandine that made her an object of dread to her fellow servants, whether slaves or free. The woman's manner was scowling and suspicious; she suffered from long fits of despondency; she muttered and gesticulated to herself; she walked about during the night,

when the rest of the household were in bed. Altogether she gave occasion, by her behaviour, to those detractors who affirmed that, whether his *mother* or not, there was no doubt she was a faithful worshipper of Satan.

In the island whence she came, and among the kindred people who had brought with them from Africa their native barbarism and superstitions, the dark rites of Obi were still sedulously cultivated, as the magic power of its votaries was implicitly believed. The three-fourths of white blood in the veins of Célandine had not prevented her, so they said, from becoming a priestess of that foul order; and the price paid for her impious exaltation was differently estimated, according to the colour of those who discussed the revolting and mysterious question, even amongst the French domestics of Madame de Montmirail, and in so practical an age as the beginning of the eighteenth century. The Quadroon, finding herself shunned by her equals, was drawn all the closer to her mistress and her little charge.

Such was the woman who pushed her way undaunted through the crowd of courtiers now thronging the Grand Alley at Versailles, eliciting no small share of attention by the gorgeousness

of her costume, the scarlet shawl she had bound like a turban round her head, the profusion of gold ornaments that serpentined about her neck and arms, together with the glaring pattern of white and orange conspicuous on her dress, till she reached the secluded corner where Cerise was sitting with her broken daisy chain and her attendant page, as she had been left by the king.

The Quadroon's whole countenance brightened into beauty when she approached her darling, and the child bounding up to meet her, ran into her arms with a cry of delight that showed their attachment was mutual. George, extremely proud of his commission, volunteered to guide them to the spot whence, as directed, they could witness the progress of the king's dinner, and the strangely matched trio proceeded through the now decreasing crowd, to all appearance perfectly satisfied with each other.

They had already taken up their position opposite the window which his majesty had indicated, and were in full enjoyment of the thrilling spectacle he had promised them, namely, a little old man in a wig, served by half-a-dozen servants at once, and eating to repletion, when Cerise, who clung to Célandine's hand, hid her face in the

bonne's gown to avoid the gaze of two gentlemen, who were staring at her with every mark of approval. "What is it, my cherished one?" said the Quadroon, in tender accents. "Who dares frighten my darling?" But the fierce voice changed into coaxing tones when the *bonne* recognised a familiar face in one of her charge's unwelcome admirers.

"Why, it's Monsieur l'Abbé! Surely you know Monsieur l'Abbé! Come, be a good child, then; make Monsieur l'Abbé a reverence, and wish him good-day!"

But Cerise persistently declined any friendly overtures whatever to Monsieur l'Abbé, hanging her head and turning her toes in most restively; so the three passed on to witness the process of eating as performed by Louis le Grand; and Monsieur l'Abbé, crumpling his extremely plain features into a sneer, observed to his companion, "It is droll enough, Florian, children never take to me, though I make my way as well as another with grown-up people. They seem to mistrust me from the first. Can it be because I am so very ugly?"

The other smiled deprecatingly. "Good looks," said he, "have nothing to do with it. Children

are like their elders. They hate intellect, because they fear it. Oh, Malletort! had I the beauty of Absalom, I would give it all willingly to possess your opportunities and your powers of using them!"

"Thank you," replied Malletort, looking gratified in spite of himself at the compliment, but perhaps envying in his secret heart the outward advantages which his friend seemed so little to appreciate.

Florian de St. Croix, just on the verge of manhood, was as handsome a youth as might be met with amongst the thousand candidates for the priesthood, of whom he was one of the most sanguine and enthusiastic. Not even the extreme plainness of his dress, appropriate to the sacred calling he was about to enter—not even his close-cut hair and pallid hue, result of deep thought and severe application—could diminish the beauty of his flashing eyes, his clear-cut features, and high, intellectual forehead, that denoted ideality and self-sacrifice as surely as the sweet womanly mouth betrayed infirmity of purpose and fatal subservience to the affections. His frame, though slender, was extremely wiry and muscular, cast, too, in the mould of an Apollo. No wonder there was a shadow of something like jealousy on his com-

panion's shrewd, ugly face, while he regarded one so superior in external advantages to himself.

The Abbé Malletort was singular in this respect. He possessed the rare faculty of appreciating events and individuals at their real value. He boasted that he had no prejudices, and especially prided himself on the accuracy with which he predicted the actions of his fellow creatures by the judgment he had formed of their characters. He made no allowance for failure, as he gave no credit to success. Men, with him, were capable or useless only as they conquered or yielded in the great struggle of life. Systems proved good or bad simply according to their results. The Abbé professed to have no partialities, no feelings, no veneration, and no affections. He had entered the Church as a mere matter of calculation and convenience. Its prizes, like those of the army, were open to intellect and courage. If the priest's outward conduct demanded more of moderation and self-restraint, on the other hand the fasts and vigils of Rome were less easily enforced than the half rations of a march or the night watches of an outpost.

Moreover, the tonsure in those days might be clipped (not close enough to draw attention) from

a skull that roofed the teeming brain of a politician; and, indeed, the Church of Rome not only permitted but encouraged the assumption of secular power by her votaries; so that the most important and lucrative posts of the empire were as open to Abbé and Cardinal, as to a Colonel of the Body-guard or a Marshal of France; while the soldier's training fitted him far less than the priest's to countermine the subtleties of diplomacy, or unravel the intricacies of finance. There remained, then, but the vow of celibacy to swallow, and, in truth, the vow of celibacy suited Malletort admirably well. Notwithstanding his ugly face, he was an especial favourite with women, on whom his ready wit, his polished manners, and, above all, his imperturbable coolness, made a pleasing impression. They liked him none the less that his reputed hardness of heart and injustice towards themselves were proverbial. While, as for his plain features, why, to quote the words of Ninon de l'Enclos, who ought to have been a good judge in such matters, "A man's want of beauty is of small account, if he be not deficient in other amiable qualities; for there is no conquest without the affections, and what mole can be so blind as a woman in love?"

CHAPTER III.

MONSIEUR L'ABBÉ.

THE crowd had passed on to witness the king's dinner, now in full progress, and the two soberly clad friends found themselves the only occupants of the gardens. Side by side they took their seats on a bench under a row of lime-trees, and continued the conversation which had originated in little Cerise and her childish beauty.

"It is a face as God made it," said Florian, his boyish features lighting up with enthusiasm. "Children are surely nearer heaven than ourselves. What a pity to think that they should grow into the painted, patched, powdered hypocrites of whom so many have passed by us even now."

"Beautifully dressed, however," answered his

worldly senior, placidly indifferent, as usual, to all that did not concern his own immediate comfort. "If there were no women, Florian, there would be no children, I conclude. Both seem necessary evils. You, I observe, prefer the lesser. As for being near heaven, that, I imagine, is a mere question of altitude. The Musketeer over there is at least a couple of inches nearer it than either of us. What matter? It will make little difference eventually to any one of the three."

Florian looked as if he did not understand. Indeed, the Abbé's manner preserved a puzzling uncertainty between jest and earnest. He took a pinch of snuff, too, with the air of a man who had thoroughly exhausted the question. But his companion, still harping on the beauty of the child, continued their conversation.

"Is she not a cousin of yours, this little angel? I know you are akin to that beautiful Marquise, her mother. Oh, Malletort! what advantages you possess, and how unconscious you seem of them!"

"Advantages!" repeated the Abbé, musing. "Well, perhaps you are right. Handsome women are the Court-cards of the game, if a man knows how to play them. It is a grand game, too, and

the stakes are well worth winning. Yet I sometimes think if I had foreseen in time how entirely you must devote body and soul to play it, I might never have sat down at all. I could almost envy a boy like that merry page who passed us with my baby cousin; a boy, whose only thought or care is to spend the time gaily now, and wear a sword as soon as his beard is grown hereafter."

"The boy will carry a sword fairly enough," answered Florian; "for he looks like a little adventurer already. Who is he? I have remarked him amongst the others for a certain bold bearing, that experience and sorrow alone will, I fear, be able to tame."

"It will take a good deal of both to tame any of that family," answered Malletort; "and this young game-chick will no doubt prove himself of the same feather as the rest of the brood when his spurs are grown. He's a Hamilton, Florian; a Hamilton from the other side of the water, with a cross of the wildest blood in France or Europe in his veins. You believe the old monkish chronicles—I don't. They will tell you that boy's direct ancestor went up the breach at Acre in front of Cœur de Lion—an Englishman of the

true pig-headed type, who had sense enough, however, to hate his vassal ever after for being a bigger fool than himself. On the mother's side he comes of a race that can boast all its sons brave, and its daughters—well, its daughters—very much the same as other people's daughters. The result of so much fighting and gasconading being, simply, that the elder branch of the family is sadly impoverished, while the younger is irretrievably ruined."

"And this lad?" asked Florian, interested in the boy, perhaps because the page's character was in some respects so completely the reverse of his own.

"Is of the younger branch," continued Malletort, "and given over body and soul to the cause of this miserable family, whose head died, not half-a-dozen years ago, under the shadow of our grand and gracious monarch, a victim to prejudice and indigestion. Well, these younger Hamiltons have always made it their boast that they grudged neither blood nor treasure for the Stuarts; and the Stuarts, I need hardly tell you Florian, for you read your breviary, requited them as men must expect to be requited who put their trust in princes, particularly of that dynasty. The elder

branch wisely took the oaths of allegiance, for the ingratitude of a reigning house is less hopeless than that of a dethroned family. I believe any one of them would be glad to accept office under the gracious and extremely ungraceful lady who fills the British throne, established, as I understand she is, on so broad a basis, there is but little room for a consort. They are scarce likely to obtain their wish. The younger branch would scout the idea, enveloped, one and all, in an atmosphere of prejudice truly insular, which ignorant people call loyalty. This boy's great-grandfather died in a battle fought by Charles I., at a place with an unpronounceable name, in the province of Yorkshires. His grandfather was shot by a platoon of musketeers in his own courtyard, under an order signed by the judicious Cromwell; and his father was drowned here, in the channel, carrying despatches for his king, as he persisted in calling him, under the respectable disguise of a smuggler. I believe this boy was with him at the time. I know when first he came to Court, people pretended that, although so young, he was an accomplished sailor; and, I remember, his hands were hard and dirty, and he always seemed to smell of tar. I will

own that now, *for* a page, he is clean, polished, and well dressed."

Florian's dark eyes kindled.

"You interest me," said he. "I love to hear of loyalty. It is the reflection of religion upon earth."

"Precisely," replied the other. "A shadow of the unsubstantial. Well, all his line are loyal enough, and I doubt not the boy has been brought up to believe that in the world there are men, women, and Stuarts. The fact of his being page here, I confess puzzles me. Lord Stair protested against it, I know, but the king would not listen, and used his own wise discretion, consenting, however, that the lad should drop his family name and be called simply—George. So George fulfils the destiny of a page, whatever that may be. As gaudy, as troublesome, and to all appearance, as useless an item in creation as the dragon-fly."

"And has the child no relations?" asked Florian, "no friends, nobody to whom he belongs? What a position; what a fate; what a cruel isolation!"

"He is indeed in that enviable situation, which I cannot agree with you in thinking merits one grain of pity. You and I, Florian, with our education and in our career, should, of all people, best appreciate the advantages of perfect freedom

from those trammels which old women of both sexes call the domestic affections."

"So young, so hopeful, so spirited," continued Florian, speaking rather to himself than his informant; "and to have no mother!"

"But he *had* a mother, I tell you," replied Malletort, "only she died of a broken heart, as women always do when a little energy is required to repair their broken fortunes. *Our* mother, my son," he proceeded, still in the same half-mocking, half-impressive tone, "*our* mother is the Church. She provides for us carefully during life, and when we die in her embrace, at least affords us decent burial and prayers for our welfare hereafter. I tell you, Florian, she is the most thoughtful as she is the most indulgent of mothers. She offers us opportunity for distinction, or allows us shelter and repose, according as our ambition soars to heaven, or limits itself, as I confess mine does, to the affairs of earth. Who shall be found exalted above their kind in the next world? (I speak as I am taught)—Priests. Who fill the high places in this? (I speak as I learn)—Priests. The king's wisest councillors, his ablest financiers, are men of the sober garment and the shaven crown; nay, judging from the simplicity of his habits and the

austerity of his demeanour, I cannot but think that the bravest marshal in our armies is only a priest in disguise."

"There are but two careers worthy of a life-sacrifice," observed Florian, his countenance glowing with enthusiasm, "and glory is the aim of each. But who would compare the soldier of France with the soldier of Rome?—the banner of the Bourbon with the cross of Calvary? How much less noble is it to serve earth than heaven!"

Malletort looked in his young friend's face as if he thought such exalted sentiments could not possibly be real, and shrewdly suspected him of covert sarcasm or jest; but Florian's open brow admitted of no misconstruction, and the elder man's features gradually relaxed into the quiet expression of amusement, not devoid of pity, with which a professor in the swimmer's art, for instance, watches the floundering struggles of a neophyte.

"You are right," said he, calmly, and after a pause; "ours is incomparably the better profession of the two, and the safer. We risk less, no doubt, and gain more. Persecution, in civilized countries at least, is happily all the other way. It is extremely profitable to be saints, and there is no call

for us to become martyrs. I think, Florian, we have every reason to be satisfied with our bargain. Why, the very ties we sever, the earthly affections we resign, are, to my mind, but so many more enforced advantages, for which we cannot be too thankful."

"There would be no merit were there no effort," answered the other; "no self-denial were there nothing to give up; but with us it is different. I am proud to think we *do* resign, and cheerfully, all that gives warmth and colouring to the hard outlines of an earthly life. Is it nothing to forego the triumphs of the camp—the bright pageantry, the graceful luxuries of the Court? Is it nothing to place yourself at once above and outside the pale of those sympathies which form the very existence of your fellow men? More than all, is it nothing, Malletort"—the young man hesitated, blushed and cast his eyes down—"is it nothing to trample out of your heart, passions, affections—call them what you will—that seem the very main-spring of your being? Is it nothing to deny yourself at once and for ever the solace of woman's companionship and the rapture of woman's love?"

"You declaim well," replied Malletort, not

affecting to conceal that he was amused, "and your arguments would have even more weight were it not that you are so palpably in earnest. This of itself infers error. You will observe, my dear Florian, as a general rule, that the reasoner's convictions are strong in direct proportion to the weakness of his arguments. But let us go a little deeper into this question of celibacy. Let us strip it of its conventional treatment, its supposed injustice, its apparent romance. To what does it amount? That a priest must not marry—good. I repeat, so much the better for the priest. What is marriage in the abstract?—The union of persons for the continuation of the species in separate and distinct races. What is it in the ideal?—The union of souls by an unphilosophical and impossible fusion of identity, which happily the personality of every human being forbids to exist. What is it in reality?—A fetter of oppressive weight and inconvenient fabric, only rendered supportable from the deadening influence of habit, combined with its general adoption by mankind. Look around you into families and observe for yourself how it works. The woman has discovered all her husband's evil qualities, of which she does not fail to remind him; and were she a reflective being,

which admits of argument, would wonder hourly how she could ever have endured such a mass of imperfections. The man bows his head and shrugs his shoulders, in callous indifference, scorning to analyze the disagreeable question, but clear only of one thing—that if he were free, no consideration would induce him to place his neck again beneath the same yoke. Another—perhaps! The same—never! Both have discovered a dissimilarity in tastes, habits, and opinions, so remarkable, that it seems scarcely possible it should be fortuitous. To neither does it occur that each was once the very reflection of the other, in thought, word, and deed, and that a blessing pronounced by a priest—a few years, nay a few months of unrestricted companionship—have wrought the miraculous change. Sometimes there are quarrels, scenes, tears, reproaches, recriminations. More often, coldness, self-restraint, inward scorn, and the forbearance of a repressed disgust. Then is the separation most complete of all. Their bodies preserve to each other the outward forms of an armed and enforced neutrality, but their souls are so far asunder, that perhaps, of all in the universe, this pair alone could, under no circumstances, come together again."

"Sacrilege!" broke in Florian, indignantly. "What you say is sacrilege against our very nature! You speak of marriage as if it *must* be the grave of Love. But at least Love has lived. At least the angel has descended and been seen of men, even though he touched the mountain only to spring upward on his flight again towards the skies. He who has really loved, happily or unhappily, married or alone, is for that love ever after a wiser, a nobler, and a better man."

"Not if he should happen to love a Frenchwoman," observed the other, taking a pinch of snuff. "Thus much I will not scruple to say for my countrywomen — their coquetries are enough to drive an honest man mad. With regard to less civilized nations (mind, I speak not from personal experience so much as observation of my kind), I admit that for a time, at least, the delusion may possess a charm, though the loss must in all cases far exceed the gain. Set your affections on a German, for instance, and observe carefully, for the experiment is curious, if a dinner with the idol does not so disgust you that not a remnant of worship is left to be swept away by supper time. A Pole is simply a beautiful barbarian, with more clothing but less manner than an Indian squaw.

An Italian deafens you with her shrill voice, pokes your eyes out with her fingers, and betrays your inmost secrets to her director, if indeed she does not prefer him to you in every respect. An Englishwoman, handsome, blonde, silent, and retiring, keeps you months in uncertainty while you woo, and when won, believes she has a right to possess you body and soul, and becomes, from a sheer sentiment of appropriation, the most exacting of wives and the most disobliging of mistresses. To make love to a Spaniard is a delicate phrase for paying court to a tigress. Beautiful, fierce, impulsive—with one leap she is in your arms—and then for a word, a look, she will stab you, herself, a rival, perhaps all three, without hesitation or remorse. *Caramba!* she considers it a compliment no doubt! Yet I tell you, Florian, were I willing to submit to such weaknesses, I had rather love any one of these, or all of them at once for that matter, than attach myself to a Frenchwoman."

Florian opened his dark eyes wide. This was new ground to the young student. These were questions more interesting than the principles of Aristotle or the experiences of the Saints. He was penetrated, too, with that strange admiration

which the young entertain for familiarity with evil in their elders. The other scanned him with half-pitying interest, broke a branch from the fragrant lime tree under which they sat, and proceeded to elucidate his theory.

"With all other women," said Malletort, "you have indeed a thousand rivals to outdo; still you know their numbers, and can calculate their resources; but with the Frenchwoman, in addition to these, you have yet another, who changes and multiplies himself day by day, who assumes a thousand Protean forms, and against whom you cannot employ the most efficient weapons—such as vanity, gaiety, and love of dissipation, by which the others are to be subdued. This enemy is dress—King Chiffon is the absolute monarch of these realms; your mistress is gay when you are sad; sarcastic when you are plaintive; reserved when you are adventurous. All this is a matter of course, but as Monsieur Vauban told the king the other day in these gardens, 'no fortress is stronger than its weakest place,' and every citadel may be carried by a *coup de main*, or reduced by the slower process of blockade. But here you have a stronghold within a stronghold; a reserve that can neither be tampered with in secret nor

attacked openly. In brief, a rival who owns this incalculable advantage, that in all situations and under all circumstances he occupies the first place in your mistress's thoughts. Bah !" concluded the Abbé, throwing from him the branch which he had stripped of leaves and blossoms, with a gesture that seemed thus to dismiss the subject once for all; "put a Frenchwoman into what position you will, her sympathies indeed may be with her lover, but her first consideration is for her dress !"

As the Abbé spoke, he observed a group of four persons passing the front of the palace, under the windows of the king's dining-saloon. It consisted of little Cerise, her mother, Célandine, and the page. They were laughing and chatting gaily, George apparently taking his leave of the other three. Florian observed a shadow cross the Abbé's face, that disappeared however from those obedient features quickly as it came; and at the same moment the Marquise passed her hand caressingly over the boy's dark curls, while he bent low before her, and seemed to do homage to her beauty in the act of bidding her a courteous farewell.

CHAPTER IV.

TANTARA!

YEAR by year a certain stag had been growing fatter and fatter in the deep glades and quiet woodlands that surrounded Fontainebleau. He was but a pricket when Cerise made her daisy chain in the gardens of Versailles, but each succeeding summer he had rubbed the velvet off another point on his antlers, and in all the king's chase was no finer head than he carried the day he was to die. Brow, bay, and tray, twelve in all, with three in a cup, at the summits, had been the result of some half-score years passed in the security and shelter of a royal forest; nor was the lapse of time which had thus brought head and haunch to perfection without its effect upon those for whose pastime the noble beast must fall.

Imagine, then, a glowing afternoon, the second week in August: not a cloud in the sky, a sun almost tropical in its power, but a clear pure air that fanned the brow wherever the forest opened into glades, and filled the broad nostrils of a dozen large, deep-chested, rich-coloured stag-hounds, snuffing and questing busily down a track of arid grass that seemed to have checked their steady well-considered unrelenting chase, and brought their wondrous instinct to a fault. One rider alone watched their efforts with a preoccupied air, yet with the ready glance of an old sportsman. He had apparently reached his point of observation before the hounds themselves, and far in advance of the rest of the chase. His close-fitting blue riding-coat, trimmed with gold-lace and turned back with scarlet facings, called a "*just au corps*," denoted that he was a courtier; but the keen eye, the erect figure, the stateliness, even stiffness of his bearing, smacked of the old soldier, more, the old soldier of France, perhaps the most professional veteran in the world.

He was not so engrossed with his own thoughts, however, but that his eye gleamed with pleasure when a tan-coloured sage, intent on business, threw a square sagacious head into the air, pro-

claiming in full deep notes his discovery of the line, and solemn conviction that he was right. The horseman swore a good round garrison oath, and cheered the hound lustily. A cry of tuneful tongues pealed out to swell the harmony. A burst of music from a distant glade announced that the stag had passed yet farther on. A couple of royal foresters, in blue and red, arrived on foot, breathless, with fresh hounds struggling in the leash; and a lady on a Spanish barb, attended by a plainly dressed ecclesiastic, came cantering down the glade, to rein up at the veteran's side with a smile of greeting on her face.

"Well met, Monsieur le Prince, once more," said she, flashing a look from her dark eyes, under which, old as he was, he lowered his own. "Always the same—always successful. In the court—in the camp—in the ball-room—in the field—if you seek the Prince-Marshal, look in the most forward post, and you will find him."

She owed him some reparation for having driven him from her side in a fit of ill-humour half an hour before, and this was her way of making amends.

"I have won posts in my time, madame," said the old soldier, an expression of displeasure settling

once more on his high worn features, "and held them, too, without dishonour. It is perhaps no disgrace to be worsted by a woman, but it is humiliating and unpleasant all the same."

"Dishonour and disgrace are words that can never be coupled with the name of Chateau-Guerrand," returned the lady, smiling sweetly in his face, a process that appeared to mollify him considerably. Then she completed his subjection by caressing her horse with one hand, while she reined him in so sharply with the other, that he rose on his hind-legs as if to rear straight on end.

"You are a hard mistress, madame," said the gentleman, looking at the beautiful barb chafing and curveting to its bit.

"It is only to show I *am* mistress," she answered in a low voice, that seemed to finish the business, for turning to her attendant cavalier, who had remained discreetly in the back-ground, she signed to him that he might come up and break the *téte-à-téte*, while she added gaily—

"I am as fond of hunting as you are, Prince. Hark! The stag is still forward. Our poor horses are dying with impatience. Let us gallop on together."

The Marquise de Montmirail had considerably

altered in character since she tended the infirmities of her poor old husband, or sat in widow's garments with her pretty child on her knee. A few years at the Court of France had brought to the surface all the evil of her character, and seemed to have stifled in her everything that was good. She had lost the advantage of her daughter's companionship, for Cerise (and in this perhaps the Marquise was right) had been removed to a distance from the Court and capital to bloom into womanhood in the healthier atmosphere of a provincial convent. She missed her darling sadly, no doubt, and for the first year or two contented herself with the gaieties and distractions common to her companions. She encouraged no lover, properly so called, and had seldom fewer than three admirers at a time. Nor had the king of late taken special notice of her; so she was only hated by the other Court ladies with the due hatred to which she was entitled from her wealth, beauty, and attractions.

After a while, however, she put in for universal dominion, and then of course the outcry raised against her was loud and long-sustained. She heeded it little; nay, she seemed to like it, and bandied sarcasms with her own sex as joyously, to

all appearance, as she exchanged compliments with the other.

She never faltered. She never committed herself. She stood on the brink, and never turned giddy, nor lost her presence of mind. What she required, it seemed, what she could not live without, was influence, more or less, but the stronger the better, over every male creature that crossed her path. When this was gained, she had done with them, unless they were celebrities, or sufficiently frivolous to be as variable as herself. In either of such cases she took considerable pains to secure the empire she had won. What she liked best was to elicit an offer of marriage. She was supposed to have refused more men, and of more different ranks, than any woman in France. For bachelor or widower who came within the sphere of her influence there was no escape. Sooner or later he must blunder into the net, and the longer he fought the more complete and humiliating was his eventual defeat. "Nothing," said the Abbé Malletort, "nothing but the certainty of the king's unacknowledged marriage to Madame de Maintenon prevented his cousin from obtaining and refusing an offer of the crown of France."

She was beautiful too, no doubt, which made it

so much worse—beautiful both with the beauty of the intellect and the senses. Not strictly by any rules of art, but from grace of outline, richness of colouring, and glowing radiance of health. She had all the ways, too, of acknowledged beauty; and even people who did not care for her were obliged to admit she possessed that strange, indefinite, inexplicable charm which every man finds in the woman he loves.

The poor Prince-Marshal! Hector de Chateau-Guerrand had undergone the baptism of fire at sixteen, had fought his duels, drank his Burgundy, and lost an estate at lansquenet in a night before he was twenty. Since then he had commanded the Musketeers of the Guard—Divisions of the great king's troops—more than once a French army in the field. It was hard to be a woman's puppet at sixty—with wrinkles and rheumatism, and failing health, with every pleasure palling, and every pain enhanced. Well, as he said himself, "*le cœur ne vieillit jamais!*" There is no fool like an old one. The Prince-Marshal, for that was the title by which he was best known, had never been ardently attached to anybody but himself till now. We need not envy him his condition.

"Let us gallop on together," said the Marquise;

but ere they could put their horses in motion a yeoman-pricker, armed to the teeth, rode rapidly by, and they waited until his Majesty should have passed. Their patience was not tried for long. While a fresh burst of horns announced another view of the quarry farther on, the King's little *calèche* turned the corner of the alley at speed, and was pulled up with considerable dexterity, that its occupant might listen for a moment to determine on his future course. Louis sat by himself in a light, narrow carriage, constructed to hold but one person. He was drawn by four cream-coloured horses, small, well-bred, and active. A child of some ten years of age acted postilion to the leaders, but the king's own hand drove the pair at wheel, and guided them with all the skill and address of his early manhood.

Nevertheless, he looked very old and feeble when he returned the obeisance of the Prince-Marshal and his fair companion. Always punctiliously polite, Louis lifted his hat to salute the Marquise, but his chin soon sank back on his chest, and the momentary gleam died out in his dull and weary eyes.

It was obvious his health was failing day by day; he was now nearly seventy-seven years of

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age, and the end could not be far off. As he passed on, an armed escort followed at a few paces distance. It was headed by a young officer of the Grey Musketeers, who saluted the Prince-Marshal with considerable deference, and catching the eye of the Marquise, half halted his horse, and then, as if thinking better of it, urged him on again, the colour rising visibly in his brown handsome face.

The phenomenon of a musketeer blushing was not likely to be lost on so keen an observer as Madame de Montmirail, particularly when the musketeer was young, handsome, and an excellent horseman.

"Who is that on guard?" said she, carelessly of course, because she really wanted to know. "A captain of the Grey Musketeers evidently. And yet I do not remember to have seen his face at Court before."

Now it was not to be expected that a Marshal of France should show interest, at a moment's notice, in so inferior an official as a mere captain of musketeers, more particularly when riding with a 'ladye-love' nearly thirty years younger than himself, and of an age far more suitable to the good-looking gentleman about whom she made inquiries. Nevertheless, the Prince had no objection to enter

on any subject redounding to his own glorification, particularly in war, and it so happened that the officer in question had served as his aide-de-camp in an affair that won him a Marshal's bâton; so he reduced his horse's pace forthwith, and plunged into the tempting subject.

"A fine young man, madame," said the Prince-Marshal, like a generous old soldier as he was, "and a promising officer as ever I had the training of. He was with me while a mere cadet in that business when I effected my junction with Vendôme at Villa-Viciosa, and I sent him with despatches from Brighuega right through Staremberg's *uhlans*, who ought to have cut him into mince-meat. Even Vendôme thanked him in person, and told me himself I must apply for the brave child's promotion."

Like other ladies, the Marquise suffered her attention to wander considerably from these campaigning reminiscences. She roused herself, however, enough to answer, not very pertinently—

"What an odious man the Duke is, and how hideous! Generally drunk, besides, and always disagreeable!"

The Prince-Marshal looked a little put out, but

he did not for this allow himself to be diverted from his subject.

"A very *fortunate* soldier, madame," he replied, pompously; "perhaps more fortunate than really deserving. Nevertheless, in war as in love, merit is of less importance than success. His Majesty thought well to place the Duke over the head of officers whose experience was greater, and their services more distinguished. It is not for me to offer an opinion. I serve France, madame, and *you*," he added, with a smile, not too unguarded because some of his teeth were gone: "I am proud to offer my homage to both."

The Marquise moved her horse impatiently. The subject did not seem to amuse her, but the Prince-Marshal had got on a favourite theme, and was not going to abandon it without a struggle.

"I do not think, madame," he proceeded, laying his hand confidentially on the barb's crest—"I do not think I have ever explained to you in detail the strategical reasons of my forced march on Villa-Viciosa in order to co-operate with Vendôme. I have been blamed in military circles for evacuating Brighuega after taking it, and abandoning the position I held at the bridge the day before the action, which I had caused to be strengthened

during the night. Now there is much to be urged on both sides regarding this movement, and I will endeavour to make clear to you the arguments for and against the tactics I thought it my duty to adopt. In the first place, you must bear in mind that the enemy's change of front on the previous morning, which was unexpected by us, and for which Staremberg had six cogent reasons, being as follows——"

The Marquise looked round to her other cavalier in despair; but no assistance was to be expected from the cynical Abbé, for it was Malletort in attendance, as usual, on his cousin.

The Prince-Marshal was, doubtless, about to recount the dispositions and manœuvres of three armies *seriatim*, with his own advice and opinions thereon, when relief came to his listener from a quarter in which she least expected it.

She was preparing herself to endure for the hundredth time the oft-told tale, when her horse started, snorted, trembled violently, and attempted to wheel round. In another instant an animal half as big as itself leaped leisurely into the glade, and went lurching down the dry sunny vista as if in utter disregard and contempt of its pursuers.

The stag had been turned back at several points by the horns of the foresters, who thus melodiously greeted every appearance of their quarry. He was beginning to think some distant refuge would be safer and more agreeable, also his instinct told him that the scent would improve while he grew warmer, and that his noisy pursuers would track him more and more unerringly as the sun went down.

Already he felt the inconvenience of those fat haunches, and that broad russet back he carried so magnificently; already he heard the deep-mouthed chorus chiming nearer and nearer, full, musical, and measured like a death-bell.

"*En avant!*" exclaimed Madame de Montmirail, as the stag, swerving from a stray hound, stretched into an honest, undisguised gallop down the glade, followed by the straggler at its utmost speed, labouring, over-paced, distressed, but rolling on, mute, resolute, and faithful to the line. The love of rapid motion, inseparable from health, energy, and high spirits, was strong in the Marquise. Her barb, in virtue of his blood, possessed pace and endurance; his mistress called on him to prove both, while she sped along on the line of chase,

accompanied by several of the hounds as they straggled up in twos and threes, and followed by most of the equestrians.

Thus they reached the verge of the forest, and here stood the king's *calèche* drawn up, his Majesty signing to them feebly yet earnestly that the stag was away over the plain.

Great was now the confusion at so exciting and so unexpected an event. The foresters, with but little breath to spare, managed to raise a final flourish on their horns. The yeoman-prickers spurred their horses with a vigour more energetic than judicious; the hounds, collecting as it seemed from every quarter of the forest, were already stringing, one after another, over the dusty plain. The King, too feeble to continue the chase, yet anxious to know its result, whispered a few words to his officer of the guard, and the musketeer, starting like an arrow from a bow, sped away after the hounds with some half-dozen of the keenest equestrians, amongst whom were the Marquise and the Prince-Marshal. Many of the courtiers, including the Abbé, seemed to think it disloyal thus to turn their backs on his Majesty, and gathered into a cluster to watch with interjections of interest and delight the pageant of the fast-receding chase.

The far horizon was bounded by another range of woods, and that shelter the stag seemed resolved to reach. The intervening ground was a vast undulating plain, crossed apparently by no obstacles to hounds or horsemen, and varied only by a few lines of poplars, and a *paved* high road to the nearest market-town.

The stag then made direct for this road; but long ere he could reach it, the chase had become so severe that many of the hounds dropped off one by one, and of the horses, only those ridden by the Marquise, the Prince-Marshal, and the Grey Musketeer, were able to keep up the appearance of a gallop.

Presently these successful riders drew near enough to distinguish clearly the object of their pursuit. The Musketeer was in advance of the others, who galloped on abreast, every nerve at its highest strain, and too preoccupied to speak a syllable.

Suddenly a dip in the ground hid the stag from sight, then he appeared again on the opposite rise, looking darker, larger, and fresher than before.

The Musketeer turned round and pointed towards the hollow in front. In a few more strides

his followers perceived a fringe of alders serpentining between the two declivities. Madame de Montmirail's dark eyes flashed, and she urged her barb to yet greater exertions.

The Musketeer sat back in his saddle, and seemed to collect his horse's energies for an effort. There was an increase of speed, a spring, a stagger, and he was over the rivulet, that stole deep and cool and shining between the alders.

The Marquise followed his horse's footmarks to an inch, and though the barb threw his head up wildly, and galloped furiously at it, he too cleared the chasm, and reached the other side in safety.

The Prince-Marshal's old blood was warmed up now, and he flew along, feeling as he used in the days of the duels, and the Burgundy, and the lansquenet. He shouted and spurred his steed, urging it with hand and voice and leg, but the highly-broken and well-trained animal felt its powers failing, and persistently declined to attempt the feat it had seen the others accomplish, so the Prince-Marshal was forced to discontinue the chase and remain on the safe side of the Rubicon, whence he turned his horse unwillingly homewards, heated, angry, and swearing many strange oaths in different languages.

Meanwhile the other two galloped on. The Marquise, though she spared no effort, finding herself unable to overtake the captain of Grey Musketeers.

All at once he stopped short at a clump of willows, through which the chase had disappeared and jumping off his horse, left the panting beast to its own devices. When she reached the trees, and looked down into the hollow below, she perceived the stag up to his chest in a bright, shallow pool, at bay, and surrounded by the eager though exhausted hounds.

The Musketeer had drawn his *couteau de chasse* and was already knee-deep in the water, but hearing her approach, turned back and, taking his hat off with a low obeisance, offered her the handle of his weapon.

It was the customary form when a lady happened to be present on such an occasion, though, as now, the compliment was almost always declined.

He had scarcely gone in and given the *coup-de-grace*, which he did like an accomplished sportsman, before some of the yeomen-prickers and other attendants came up, so that the disembowelling and other obsequies were performed with proper

ceremony. Long, however, ere these had been concluded, the Marquise was riding her tired horse slowly homeward through the still sweet autumn evening, not the least disturbed that she had lost the Abbé and the rest of her escort, but ruminating, pleasantly and languidly as her blood cooled down, on the excitement of the chase and the events of the day.

She watched the sunset reddening and fading on the distant woods; the haze of twilight gradually softening and blurring and veiling the surrounding landscape; the curved edge of the young moon peering over the trees, and the evening star hanging, like a golden lamp, against the purple curtain of the sky.

With head bent down, loose reins, and tired hands resting on her lap, Madame de Montmirail pondered on many matters as the night began to fall.

She wondered at the Abbé's want of enterprise, at the Prince-Marshal's activity—if the first could have yet reached home, and whether the second, with his rheumatism, was not likely to spend a night in the woods.

She wondered at the provoking cynicism of the one, and the extraordinary depressive powers pos-

sessed by the other; more than all, how she could for so long have supported the attentions of both.

She wondered what would have happened if the barb had fallen short at his leap; whether the Musketeer would have stopped in his headlong course to pity and tend her, and rest her head upon his knee, inclining to the belief that he would have been very glad to have the opportunity.

Then she wondered what it was about this man's face that haunted her memory, and where she could have seen those bold keen eyes before.

CHAPTER V.

THE USHER OF THE BLACK ROD.

FOR the courtiers of Louis le Grand there was no such thing as hunger or thirst, want of appetite, heat, cold, lassitude, depression, or fatigue. If he chose they should accompany him on long journeys, in crowded carriages, over bad roads, they were expected, nevertheless, to appear fresh, well-dressed, exuberant in spirits, inclined to eat, or content to starve, unconscious of sun and wind; above all, ready to agree with his Majesty upon every subject at a moment's notice. Ladies enjoyed in this respect no advantage over gentlemen. Though a fair Amazon had been hunting the stag all day, she would be required to appear just the same in grand court toilet at night; to take her place at

lansquenet; to be present at the royal concerts, twenty fiddles playing a heavy opera of Cavalli right through; or, perhaps, only to assist in lining the great gallery, which the king traversed on his way to supper. Everything must yield to the lightest whim of royalty; and no more characteristic reply was ever made to this arbitrary descendant of St. Louis than that of the eccentric Cardinal Bonzi, to whom the king complained one day at dinner that he had no teeth. "Teeth, sire!" replied the astute churchman, showing, while he spoke, a strong, even, well-polished row of his own, "Why, who *has* any teeth?"

His Majesty, however, like mortals of inferior rank, did not touch on the accomplishment of his seventy-seventh year without sustaining many of the complaints and inconveniences of old age. For some time past not only had his teeth failed, but his digestion, despite of the regimen of iced fruits and sweetmeats, on which he was put by his physician Fagon, became unequal to its task. Everybody but himself and his doctor perceived the rapidity with which a change was approaching. In vain they swaddled him up in feather-pillows at night, to draw the gout from him through the pores of his skin; in vain they administered sage,

veronica, cassia, and Jesuit-bark between meals, while they limited his potations to a little weak Burgundy and water, thereby affording some amusement to those present from the wry faces made by foreign lords and grandees who were curious to taste the king's beverage. In vain they made him begin dinner with mulberries, and melons, and rotten figs, and strong soups and salads. There is but one remedy for old age, and it is only to be found in the Pharmacopœia at the last chapter of the book. To that remedy the king was fast approaching—and yet hunting, fiddling, dining, promenades, concerts, and the whole round of empty court gaiety went on all the same.

The Marquise de Montmirail returned to her apartments at the palace with but little time to spare. It wanted but one hour from the king's supper, and she must attend with the other ladies of the court, punctual as clock-work, directly the folding-doors opened into the gallery, and his majesty, in an enormous wig, should totter in at one end to totter out again at the other. Nevertheless, a good deal of decoration can be done in sixty minutes when a lady, young and beautiful, is assisted by an attendant whose taste becomes chastened and her activity quickened by the super-

intendence of four distinct toilets every day. So the Marquise and Célandine between them had put the finishing touches to their great work within the appointed time. The former was going through a gratifying revision of the whole at her looking-glass, and the latter was applying to her mistress's handkerchief that perfume of orange-flowers which alone his Majesty could endure, when a loud knocking at the outer door of the apartment suspended the operations of each, bringing an additional colour to the Marquise's cheek, and a cloud of displeasure on the Quadroon's brow.

"See what it is, Célandine," said the former, calmly, wondering in her heart, though it seemed absurd, whether this disturbance could relate in any manner to the previous events of the day.

"It is the Abbé, I'll be bound," muttered Célandine, proceeding to do as she was bid; adding sulkily, though below her breath, "he might knock there till his knuckles were sore if I was mistress instead of maid!"

It was the Abbé, sure enough, in plain attire, as became his profession; but with an expression of hope and elation on his brow which even his perfect self-command seemed unable to conceal.

"Pardon, Madame," said he, standing, hat in hand, on the threshold; "I was in attendance to conduct you to the Gallery, as usual, when the intelligence that reached me, and, indeed, the confusion I myself witnessed, induced me to take the liberty of waiting on you at once."

"No great liberty," answered the Marquise, smiling, "seeing that I must have encountered you, at any rate, within three paces of my door. But what is this alarming news, my cousin, that agitates even your imperturbable front? Nothing wrong with the barb, I hope?"

"Not so bad as that, Madame," replied the Abbé, who was rapidly recovering his calmness. "It is only a matter affecting his Majesty. I have just learned the king is taken seriously ill. Fagon crossed the courtyard five minutes ago. Worse than that, Père Tellier has been sent for."

"Père Tellier!" repeated the Marquise. "The king's confessor! Then the attack is dangerous?"

"There is no doubt that his majesty's state is precarious in the extreme," answered the Abbé, seriously. "It is a severe and exhausting malady from which he suffers, and at his time of life we

may anticipate the gravest results. Madame, I must be in Paris by break of day to-morrow, to wait on the Duke of Orleans."

She looked at him with a half-contemptuous indulgence, and laughed.

"So soon?" said she. "Nay, then, I am satisfied you think the worst. My cousin, you are wise in your generation, no doubt; and it would be a sudden blow, indeed, that should fall and find you unprepared. Nevertheless, is not this haste indecent? Worse; is it not ill-judged? The king has a wonderful constitution; Fagon is a cautious physician. His Majesty may recover in spite of his doctor."

"And sin again in spite of his confessor," added the Abbé. "Nevertheless, I think both have foreseen a crisis for some time past. Fagon has called in Maréchal to help him; and Père Tellier has been asking for every vacant benefice during the last three weeks."

"It was very polite of you, my cousin," observed the Marquise, after a pause, "to come and tell me at once; though the only immediate result of all this confusion to *me* is, that I suppose I may undress and go to bed. I have had a fatiguing day."

"Pardon again," answered the Abbé. "I fear you must attend as usual in the Gallery; and, indeed, it would be a thousand pities that such a toilette should be wasted, for you look beautiful, and are charmingly dressed. You know, besides, that only the king's own order can rescind the daily regulations for the Court."

"We had better proceed, then," said Madame de Montmirail. "Célandine has revised me thoroughly, and the sooner I go the sooner I shall get it over. Believe me, it would require some excitement stronger than common to keep me awake to-night."

"One instant, madame," replied the Abbé. "I will not detain you longer; but at a crisis like the present what I have to say merits your most earnest attention. In the first place, will you permit Célandine to examine if the outer door be shut?"

The scowl on the Quadroon's brow grew deeper, while, in obedience to a sign from her mistress, she retired into the outer chamber. The Marquise seated herself on a couch near the toilet-table, spreading her skirts out carefully, lest their freshness might sustain damage in that position, and prepared to receive her cousin's confidences as he stood near, cool, polished, smiling, but obviously

repressing, with an effort, the strong agitation under which he laboured.

While she sat in that graceful attitude, her head turned up towards his face, one beautifully moulded arm and hand resting in her lap, the other yet ungloved holding a closed fan against her lips, it may have occurred to the Abbé that so many charms of person and manner might be applied to a worthier purpose than the furtherance of Court intrigues, or the advancement of any one man's ambition. It may even have occurred to him, though doubtless if it did so the thought had to be stifled as it rose, that it would be no unpleasant task, however difficult, to woo and win and wear such beauty for himself and his own happiness; and that to be his cousin's favoured lover was a more enviable position than could be afforded by Comptroller's wand, or Cardinal's cap, or Minister's portfolio. For a moment his rugged features softened like a clearing landscape under a gleam of sun, while he looked on her and basked, as it were, in the radiance of her beauty, ere he turned back to the chill, shadowy labyrinth of deceit in which he spent his life.

Madame de Montmirail's exterior was of that sparkling kind which, like the diamond, is enhanced by the richness of its setting. In full Court toilet

as he saw her now, few women would have cared to enter the lists as her rivals. The dress she wore was of pale yellow satin, displaying indeed with considerable liberality her graceful neck and shoulders, glowing in the warm tints of a brunette. It fitted close to her well-turned bust, spreading into an enormous volume of skirts below the waist, overlaid by a delicate fabric of black lace, and looped up here and there in strings of pearls. Her waving hair, black and glossy, was turned back from a low broad forehead, and gathered behind her ears into a shining mass, from which a ringlet or two escaped, smooth and elastic, to coil, snake-like, on her bosom. One row of large pearls encircled her neck, and one bracelet of diamonds and emeralds clung to her ungloved arm. Other ornaments she had none, though an open dressing-case on the toilet-table flashed and glittered like a jeweller's shop.

And now I have only made an inventory of her dress after all. How can I hope to convey an idea of her face? How is it possible to describe that which constitutes a woman's loveliness? that subtle influence which, though it generally accompanies harmony of colouring and symmetry of feature, is by no means the result of these advan-

tages; nay, often exists without them, and seems in all cases independent of their aid? I will only say of her charms, that Madame de Montmirail was already past thirty, and nine men out of every ten in the circle of her acquaintance were more or less in love with her.

She had a beautiful foot, besides. It was peeping out now from beneath her dress. The Abbé's eyes unconsciously fixed themselves on the small white satin shoe, as he proceeded with his confidences.

"It is good to be prepared, my cousin," said he, in a low, hurried voice, very different from his usual easy, careless tone. "Everything will now be changed, if, as I expect, the indisposition of to-night is but the beginning of the end. You know my situation; you know my hopes; you know the difficulties I have had to contend with. The king's suspicions, the courtiers' jealousy, the imprudence of my patron himself, and you know, too, that through good and evil I have always stood firm by the Duke of Orleans. It is evident that in a few days he will be the most powerful man in France."

"Afterwards?" asked the Marquise, apparently unmoved by the contingency.

"Afterwards!" repeated Malletort, almost with

indignation. "Do you not see the career that opens itself before us all? Who is best acquainted with the Duke's early history?—Abbé Malletort. Who is the Duke bound to serve before the whole world? Not from gratitude—bah! that is a thing of course—but from motives of the clearest self-interest?—Abbé Malletort. In brief, in whom does he confide?—In Abbé Malletort. And to whom does the Abbé lay bare his hopes, his aspirations, his ambition?—To whom but to his sweet cousin, Madame de Montmirail?"

"And what would you have me do?" asked the Marquise, yawning, while she carelessly fastened the bracelet on her arm.

"I would have you guard your lips with a clasp of iron," answered the Abbé. "I would have you keep watch to-night and to-morrow, and every day till the end comes—on your words, your looks, your gestures—the very trimmings and colour of the dresses you wear. Be polite to all; but familiar, cordial, even communicative with none. In brief, have no friends, no enemies, no dislikes, no predilections, till the old state of affairs is ended and the new begun."

"I think you can trust me," answered the Marquise. "My feelings are little likely to betray

me into indiscretion; and though I have plenty of lovers at Court, I do not imagine I have many friends."

She spoke wearily, and finished with something like a sigh.

The Abbé's eyes sparkled. "I *know* I can!" said he. "My cousin has none of the weaknesses of her sex, and all its beauty for her own share." Then he opened the door and spoke loud enough for Célandine to hear. "We must have Mademoiselle back from her pension. She is old enough now to take her place as an ornament to society and the Court."

Malletort understood true economy, and he knew that this bribe, while it cost him nothing, would purchase favour with the Quadroon whose dislike he had observed and resolved to efface.

Madame de Montmirail bowed and took his arm. It was now high time they were both in attendance on his Majesty, should the concert fixed for that night be permitted to take place.

As they walked through the corridor, however, a great confusion was heard in the gallery they were about to enter. There was a scuffling of feet; a murmur of agitated voices suppressed to whispers, and the smothered sobs of women,

denoting some sad catastrophe. When the door opened, the musicians crowded hurriedly out, carrying with them their instruments, and tumultuously impeding the progress of a spare, grave man, in a priest's dress, who pushed his way through, with every appearance of anxiety and dismay.

It was Père Tellier, the king's confessor, summoned in mortal haste to the bedside of his dying master.

The Marquise and the Abbé had that day looked their last upon the face of Louis le Grand. Already, through pale attendants and anxious courtiers—through valets and chamberlains and musketeers of the guard—might be seen approaching the real Usher of the Black Rod.

CHAPTER VI.

A JESUIT'S TASK.

OF all armies on earth, there is none with a discipline so perfect as exists in the ranks of the Jesuits. No similar brotherhood embraces so extensive a scheme; no society spreads its ramifications so wide and deep. The soldier who enlists under that black banner abandons at once and for ever his own affections, his own opinions, his own responsibilities; nay, his very identity becomes fused in the general organization of his order. Florian de St. Croix, with his warm impulsive disposition, his tendency to self-sacrifice, and his romantic temperament, had better have hanged round his neck any other millstone than this.

As he walked rapidly down a long perspective

of paved road, between two lofty rows of poplars, his head bent low, his hands clenched, his lips muttering, and his swift unequal strides denoting both impetuosity and agitation, he seemed strangely and sadly altered from the bright enthusiastic youth who sat with Abbé Malletort under the limes at Versailles.

His very name had been put off, with every other association that could connect the past life of the layman with the future labours of the priest. He was known as Brother Ambrose now in the muster-rolls of the order; though out of it, he was still addressed as Florian by his former friends. It was supposed, perhaps, in the wisdom of his superiors, that the devoted knight could fight best under a plain shield on which no achievements might ever be emblazoned; but which, in theory at least, was to be preserved pure and stainless, until he was carried home on it from his last field.

For Florian, indeed, the battle had already commenced. He was fighting it now, fiercely, under that smiling summer sky; between those fragrant meadows, fringed with flowering hedges; amongst the clustering orchards and smiling farms; the green nooks, the gleaming waters, and the

free, fresh range of wooded hill and dale in pleasant Normandy. Little thought the buxom peasant-woman—with her clean white cap, long earrings, and handsome weather-beaten face, as she crossed herself in passing, and humbly received the muttered benediction—how much of war was in his breast who proffered peace to her and hers; or the prosperous farmer riding by on his stamping grey stallion—with tail tied up, broad, well-fed back, huge brass-bound saddle, and red-fronted bridle—how enviable was his own contented ignorance compared with the learning and imagination, and aspirations running riot in the brain of that wan hurrying priest. The fat *curé* thinking of his dinner, his duties, and the stone-fruit ripening on his wall, greeted him with professional friendliness, tempered by profound respect; for in his person he beheld the principle of self-devotion, which constitutes the advance, the vanguard, the very forlorn hope of an army in which he felt himself a mere suttler or camp-follower at the best; but his sleep that afternoon over a bottle of light wine in his leafy arbour would have been none the sounder could he have known the horror of doubt and darkness that weighed like lead on his brother's spirit; the

fears, the self-reproaches, the anxieties that tore at his brother's heart.

Yet the same sun was shining on them all; the same glorious landscape of wood and water, waving corn, and laughing upland — gold and silver, and blue, and green, and purple—spread out for their enjoyment; the same wild-flowers blooming, the same wild-birds carolling, to delight their senses; the same heaven looking down in tender pity on the wilful blindness and reckless self-torture of mankind.

Florian had entered the order, believing that in so doing he adopted the noblest career of chivalry below, to end in the proudest triumph of victory above. Like the Crusaders of the middle ages, he turned to his profession, and beheld in it a means of ambition, excitement, influence over his fellow-men purchased—not at the sacrifice—but in the salvation of his soul. Like them, he was to have the best of it both for earth and heaven: like them, he was to submit to labour, privation, all the harassing exigencies of warfare; but, like them, he was upheld by the consciousness of power which springs from discipline and cohesion, by an unselfish sentiment of professional pride, not more peculiar to the soldier than the priest.

He took the vows of obedience, the blind, unreasoning, unhesitating obedience exacted by the order, with a thrill of exultation. As a Jesuit, he must henceforth know neither friendship nor affection; neither sentiment, passion, nor self-regard. His brain must be always clear, his eye keen, his hand ready; but brain must think, eye see, and hand strike only in conformity with the will of a superior. He was to preserve every faculty of nature except volition. He was to become a galvanized corpse rather than a living man.

And now these hideous vows, this impossible obedience, must be put to the test. Like the demoniacs of old, he writhed in torture as he walked. It seemed that the evil spirit rent and tore the man because it could not come out of him.

He was hurrying on foot to the convent of our Lady of Succour. He knew every stone in that paved road as he knew the fingers on his own hand. His superior had lately installed him confessor to the establishment; *him*, young, handsome, impressionable, with his dark eyes and his loving smile. There was another confessor, too, a stout old man, with a rosy face and a kind heart; altogether, as it would seem, a far more judicious appointment; but

Florian's duties brought him little in contact with the nuns, and lay amongst the young ladies, several of whom were daughters of noble families, receiving their education in a pension attached to the convent.

Of these, Brother Ambrose had been specially enjoined to turn his attention to Mademoiselle de Montmirail, to obtain all the influence in his power over the frank, innocent mind of that engaging girl, to win her affections as much as possible from earthly vanities, to which, as she was on the verge of womanhood, it is probable she was not disinclined, and to lead her gradually into a train of thought that might at last bring her home to the bosom of the Church as a nun. That Church would at the same time protect her from temptation, by relieving her of the earthly dross with which she would be encumbered, and which would pass into its holy keeping the day the heiress should assume the Black Veil.

Besides the reversion of her mother's wealth, she would inherit considerable property of her own when she came of age. Had it been otherwise, it is possible the same interest might not have been shown for the insurance of her salvation, and Brother Ambrose might have been making fires of

camel's dung in Tartary, or bearing witness by martyrdom in Morocco, instead of hurrying through the shade of those quivering poplars in homely, happy Normandy.

But as he approached the convent of our Lady of Succour, Brother Ambrose—or Florian, as we shall call him for the present—reduced his walk to a much slower step, and became conscious of a hot feeling about his eyes, a cold moisture in the palms of his hands, that had no connection with theology, polemics, or the usual duties of a priest. There are proverbs used in the world, such as "Tit-for-tat;" "The biter bit;" "Go for wool, and come back shorn," which are applicable to ecclesiastics as to laymen. It is no safer to play with edged tools in a convent than in a ball-room; and it is a matter of the merest hazard who shall get the best of an encounter in which the talents and education of a clever but susceptible man are pitted against the bright looks and fresh roses of girlhood at eighteen.

Florian had been enjoined to use every effort for the subjugation of Mademoiselle de Montmirail. He was to be restricted by no considerations such as hamper the proceedings of ordinary minds, for was not this one of the fundamental

principles of his order—"It is lawful to do evil that good may come?" He had not indeed swallowed this maxim without considerable repulsion, so utterly at variance, as it seemed, not only with reason, but with that instinctive sentiment of right which is often a surer guide than even reason itself; but he had been convinced against his will by those under whose feet he had chosen to place his neck, and had at last brought his opinions, if not his feelings, to the necessary state of control. A few interviews with Mademoiselle de Montmirail in the cool dark convent parlour—a few calm still evenings in the quiet convent garden, under the shade of the trellised beeches, amidst the fragrance of the flower-beds and the heavy perfume of the syringa, waiting for the rustle of that white dress along the gravel-walk—a few questions—and misgivings from the penitent—a few phrases of advice or encouragement from the priest—and Florian found himself wildly, hopelessly, wickedly in love with the girl whom it was his duty, his sacred duty on which his soul's salvation depended, to persuade, or lure, or force into a cloister. These things come by degrees. No man can complain that timely warning is not given him, yet the steps are so gradual, so easy, so imperceptible

by which he descends into the pleasant flood, that it is only when his footing is lost he becomes really aware of danger, or knows he is sentenced and must swim about in it till he drowns.

Florian's task was to obtain influence over the girl. Thus he salved his conscience till it was too late, and thus excused himself for the eagerness with which he caught every glance of her eye, and drank in every tone of her voice. It was only when his own looks fell before hers, when he trembled and turned pale at the sound of her step—when her image—serene and fair and gracious—rose between him and the Cross at which he knelt, that he knew his peril, his weakness, and his sin.

But it was too late then; though he wrestled with the phantom, it overcame him time by time. Prostrate, bleeding, vanquished, he would confess with something of the bitterness of spirit and plaintive proud self-sacrifice of a lost angel, that he had given his soul to Cerise, and did not grudge her the gift.

Not even though she refused to love him in return. Perhaps, after all, this was the poisoned edge of the weapon—the bitter drop in the cup—and yet had it been otherwise, it may be, the

young Jesuit could have found strength to conquer his infatuation, self-sacrifice to give up freely that which was freely his own.

It was not so, however. The very innocence that guarded the girl, while it lured him irresistibly to destruction, was the most insurmountable barrier in his path; and so he hovered on, hoping that which he dared not realise—wishing for all he felt, he would yet be unwilling to accept; striving for a prize unspeakably precious, though, perhaps I should say, *because* impossible of attainment, and which even if he could win it, he might not wear so much as an hour. No wonder his heart beat and his breath came quick, while he passed with stealthy gait into the convent-garden, a pitfall for the feet that walked in innocence—a black sheep in a stainless flock—a leper where all the rest were clean.

But Cerise, radiant in her white dress, crossed the sunny lawn and came down the accustomed path with more than their usual light shining in her blue eyes, with a fresher colour than common on her soft young cheeks. To him she had never looked so beautiful—so womanly, so attractive. The struggle had been very fierce during his solitary walk; the defeat was flagrant in

proportion. He ought to have known a bitter disappointment must be in store to balance the moment of rapture in which he became conscious of her approach. Some emanation seemed to glorify the air all around her, and to warn him of her presence long before she came. To the lady-superior of the convent, to her elders and instructors, Mademoiselle de Montmirail was nothing more than a well-grown damsel, with good eyes and hair, neither more nor less frivolous and troublesome than her fellows, with much room for improvement in the matters of education, music, manners, and deportment; but to the young Jesuit, she was simply—an angel.

Cerise held both hands out to her director, with a greeting so frank and cordial that it should have undeceived him on the spot. The lady-superior, from her shaded windows, might or might not be a witness to their interview, and there is no retreat perhaps of so much seclusion, yet so little privacy, as a convent-garden; but Cerise did not care though nuns and lay-sisters and all overlooked her every gesture, and overheard every word she spoke.

"I am so pleased," she burst out, clapping her hands, as soon as he released them. "Wish me

joy, good father! I have such happy news! My dear kind mamma! And she writes to me herself! I knew the silk that fastened it even before I saw her hand on the cover. Such good news. Oh! I am so pleased! so pleased!"

She would have danced for pure joy had she not remembered she was nearly eighteen. Also perhaps, for a girl's heart is very pitiful, she may have had some faint shadowy conception that the news so delightful to herself would be less welcome to her companion.

He was looking at her with the admiration in his heart shining out of his deep dark eyes.

"You have not told me what your good news is, my daughter," he observed in a tone that made her glance quickly into and away from his face, but that sobered the effervescence of her gaiety like a charm.

"It is a long letter from mamma!" she said, "and a whole month before I expected one. Judge if that is not charming. But, better still, I am to go back to her very soon. I am to live with her at the Hôtel Montmirail. She is fitting up my apartment already. I am to quit the convent when my quarter is out?"

He knew it was coming. There is always

consciousness of a blow for a moment before it falls.

"Then you have but a few more days to remain in Normandy," replied the young priest, and again the change in his voice arrested her attention. "My daughter, will you not regret the happy hours you have spent here, the quiet, the repose of the convent, and—and—the loving friends you leave behind?"

He glanced round while he spoke, and thought how different the white walls, the drooping branches, the lawn, the flower-beds, and the walk beneath the beeches would look when she was gone.

"Of course I shall never cease to love all those I have know here," she answered; and her eye met his own fearlessly, while there was no tinge of sorrow, such as he would have liked to detect in her voice. "But I am going home, do you see! Home to my dear mamma; and I shall be in Paris, and assist at operas, and balls, and fêtes. My father, I fear, I shall like it,—oh, so much!"

There remained little time for further explanations. The refectory bell was ringing, and Cerise must hurry in and present herself for her ration of fruit and chocolate; to which refreshment indeed

she seemed more than usually inclined. Neither her surprise nor her feelings had taken away her appetite, and she received her director's benediction with a humility respectful, edifying and filial, as if he had been her grandfather.

"I shall perhaps not visit you at the convent again, my daughter," he had said, revolving in his own mind a thousand schemes, a thousand impossibilities, tinged alike with fierce bitter disappointment, and to this she had made answer meekly—

"But you will think of me very often, my father; and, oh, remember me, I entreat of you, in your prayers!"

Then Fiorian knew that the edifice he had taken such pains to rear was crumbling away before his eyes, because, in his anxiety to build it for his own habitation, he had laid its foundations in the sand.

CHAPTER VII.

ST. MARK'S BALSAM.

THE death of the great king, and the first transactions of the Regency, left little leisure to Abbé Malletort for the thousand occupations of his every-day life. With the busy churchman, to stagnate was a cessation of existence. As some men study bodily health and vigour, carefully attending to the development of their frames by constant and unremitting exercise, so did the Abbé preserve his intellect in the highest possible training by its varied use; and seemed to grudge the loss of every hour in which he either omitted to learn something new or lay a fresh stepping-stone for the employment of knowledge previously acquired. Like Juvenal's Greek, he studied all the sciences in turn, but his labour

was never without an object, nor had he the slightest scruples in applying its results to his own advantage. Malletort was qualified to deal with the most consummate knave; but he might have been unconsciously out-manœuvred by a really honest man, simply from his own habitual disregard of the maxim, as true in ethics as in mathematics, which teaches that the shortest way from any one given point to another is a straight line.

The Abbé had therefore many irons in his fire, careful however so to hold them that he should preserve his own fingers from being burnt; and amongst others, he often applied his spare hours to the study of chemistry.

Now, in the time of which I am speaking, the tree of knowledge had not been entirely denuded of its parasite, credulity. Science and superstition were not yet finally divorced; and the Philosopher's stone was still eagerly sought by many an enthusiast, who liked to regenerate the world in a process of which the making a colossal fortune for himself should be the first step. Not that the Abbé quite believed in the possibility of creating gold, but that, true to his character, he was prepared to be satisfied with any glittering substitute

which the world could be induced to accept in its stead. So he too had his little laboratory, his little forge, his little crucibles, and vials, and acids, and essences, all the rudiments of science, and some faint foreshadowings of her noblest discoveries.

If a man goes into his garden, and seeks eagerly on hands and knees, we will suppose, for a four-leaved shamrock, I am not prepared to say that he will succeed in finding that rare and abnormal plant; but in his search after it, and the close attention thereby entailed, he will doubtless observe many beauties of vegetation, many curious arrangements of nature, that have hitherto escaped his notice; and though he fails to discover the four-leaved shamrock, he makes acquaintance with a hundred no less interesting specimens, and returns home a wiser naturalist than he went out. So was it with the adepts, as they called themselves, who sought diligently after the Philosopher's stone. They read, they thought, they fused, they dissolved, they mingled; they analysed fluids, they separated gases; they ascertained the combinations of which one substance was formed, and the ingredients into which another could be resolved. They missed the object of their search, no doubt, but

they lost neither for themselves nor their successors all the result of their labours; for while the precious elixir itself escaped them, they captured almost everything else that was worth learning, for the application of chemistry to the humbler purposes of every-day life. Unfortunately, too, in tampering with so many volatile essences, they became familiar with the subtler kinds of poison. A skilful adept of that school knew how to rid a patron of his enemies in twenty-four hours without fail, and to use the while no more overt weapon than the grasp of a gloved hand, a pinch of scented snuff, or the poisoned fragrance of a posy of flowers.

Such men drove a thriving trade in Paris during the Regency; and our Abbé, himself no mean proficient in the craft, was in the habit of spending many an hour in the laboratory of one who could boast he was a match for the most skilful of the brotherhood.

It was for this purpose that Malletort crossed the Seine, and penetrated into one of the loftiest, gloomiest, and narrowest streets of Old Paris—how different from Imperial Paris of to-day!—to thread its windings with his accustomed placid face and jaunty step ere he stopped at the door of the

tallest, most dilapidated, and dirtiest building in the row.

The Abbé's face was, if possible, more self-satisfied, his step even lighter than usual. He was in high favour with the Regent; and the Regent, at least among the lower classes, was still the most popular man in France. They were aware of his vices, indeed, but passed them over in a spirit of liberality, bordering on want of principle, with which the French, in this respect so unlike ourselves, permit their leading men a latitude of private conduct proportioned to their public utility. Had the Abbé doubted his patron's popularity, he need only have listened to an impudent little urchin, who ran almost between his legs, shouting at the top of his voice a favourite street song of the day called "The Débonnaire."

"'Tis a very fine place to be monarch of France,
Most Christian king, and St. Louis's son,
When he takes up his fiddle, the others must dance,
And they durstn't sit down till the music's done;
But I'd rather be Regent—eh! wouldn't you, Pierre?
Such a Regent as ours, so débonnaire.
Tra-la-la—tra-la-la—such a mien, such an air!
Oh, yes! our Regent is débonnaire.

"A monarch of France, when they bring him to dine,
They must hand him a cloth, and a golden bowl;
But the Regent can call for a flagon of wine,
And need never sit down till he's emptied the whole.

He wouldn't give much for your dry-lipped fare,
This Regent of ours, so débonnaire.
Tra-la-la—tra-la-la—how he'll stagger and swear!
Oh, yes! our Regent is débonnaire.

"A monarch of France has a mate on the throne,
And his likings and loves must be under the rose;
But the Regent takes all the sweet flowers for his own,
And he pulls them by handfuls wherever he goes.
Of the bright and the fair, the rich and the rare,
Our Regent you see, is so débonnaire.
Tra-la-la—tra-la-la—he puts in for his share,
Oh, yes! our Regent is débonnaire.

"A monarch of France has his peers in a row,
And they bring him his boots with the morning light;
But our Regent is never caught barefooted so,
For his *roués* and he, they sit booted all night!
And they drink and they swear, and they blink and they stare—
And never a monarch of France can compare,
Neither Louis the Fat, nor yet Philip the Fair,
With this Regent of ours, so débonnaire,
Tra-la-la—tra-la-la—let us drink to him, Pierre!
Oh, yes! our Regent is débonnaire."

"Tra-la-la, tra-la-la, he is débonnaire?" hummed the Abbé, as he mounted the wooden staircase, and stopped at the first door on the landing; "Monsieur le Duc is welcome to make all the music for our puppet-dance so long as he leaves it to Monsieur l'Abbé to pull the strings."

Two gaudily-dressed footmen answered Malletort's summons, and admitted him obsequiously as

being a well-known friend of their master's, before he had time to ask if Signor Bartoletti was within. The Abbé had visited here too often to be surprised at the luxuries of the apartment into which he was ushered, so little in character with the dirt and dilapidation that prevailed outside; but Signor Bartoletti, alleging in excuse the requirements of his southern blood, indulged in every extravagance to which his means would stretch, was consequently always in difficulties, and therefore ready to assist in any scheme, however nefarious, provided he was well paid.

The Signor's tastes were obviously florid. Witness the theatrical appearance of his lackeys, the bright colour of his furniture, the gaudy ornaments on his chimney-piece, the glaring pictures on his walls, nay, the very style and chasing of a massive flagon of red wine standing on the table by a filigree basket of fruit for his refection.

The man himself, too, was palpably over-dressed, wearing a sword here in the retirement of his chamber, yet wearing it as one whose hand was little familiar with its guard. Every resource of lace, velvet, satin, and embroidery had been employed in vain to give him an outward semblance of distinction; but there was an expression of

intellect and energy in his dark beetle-browed face, with its restless black eyes, that, in spite of low stature and ungainly make, redeemed him from the imputation of utter vulgarity.

His hands, too (and there is a good deal of character in the hand), were strong, nervous, and exceedingly well-shaped, though sadly stained and scorched by the acids he made use of in the prosecution of his art.

A less keen observer than the Abbé might not have remarked beneath the Signor's cordial greeting symptoms of anxiety, and even apprehension, blended with something of the passive defiance which seems to say, "I am in a corner. I have no escape. I don't like it; but I must make the best of it."

A less keen observer, too, might not have detected a ring of bravado in the tone with which he accosted his visitor as a disciple and fellow-labourer in the cause of science.

"Welcome, monsieur," said he—"welcome to the teacher who needs the assistance of his pupil every step he travels on the radiant path. Have you made discoveries, Monsieur l'Abbé?—Fill your glass, and impart them. Have you encountered difficulties?—Fill your glass, and con-

quer them. Have you seen the true light glimmering far, far off across the black waters?—Fill your glass, I say, and let us drink success to our voyage ere we embark once more in search of the Great Secret."

"Faith, I believe we're nearer it than you think for, Bartoletti," answered Malletort, smiling coldly, "though I doubt if you could look to the right point of the compass for it with all your geography. What do you think of the Scotchman's banking scheme, my gold-seeking friend? Is not Monsieur Las* a better alchymist than either of us? Has he not discovered the Great Arcanum? And without fire or bellows, crucible, alembics, or retort? Why, the best of us have used up every metal that the earth produces without arriving, though I grant you we have come very near it, yet without arriving at perfection, and here's an Englishman only asks for a ton or so of paper, a government stamp, and—presto!—with a stroke of the pen he turns it all to gold."

"Have you, too, bought Mississippi Stock?" asked the Signor, eagerly. "Then the scheme is

* A national banking scheme was about this period proposed to the Regent of France by a financial speculator of Scottish extraction named Law.

prospering, the shares will rise once more. It is good to hold on!"

"Not quite such a fool!" answered the Abbé, and Bartoletti's swarthy face fell several inches, for he had a high opinion of his visitor's financial perceptions.

"And yet the Rue Quincampoix was so thronged yesterday, I was compelled to leave my coach, and bid my lackeys force a passage for me through the crowd," urged the Signor. "Madame was there, and the Duc du Maine, and more peers of France than you would see at the council. There *must* be life in it! All the world cannot be dupes. And yet the shares have fallen even since this morning."

"All the world are not likely to be on the winning side," replied the Abbé, quietly, "or who would be left to pay the stakes? From whom do you suppose Monsieur Las makes his profits? You know he has bought the Hôtel Mazarin. You know he has bought Count de Tessés' house, furniture, pictures, plate and all, even to the English carriage-horses that his coachman does not know how to drive; where do you suppose the money comes from? When a society of people are engaged in eating one

another, it seems to me that the emptiest stomach has the best chance."

His listener looked thoughtfully on his scorched, scarred fingers. It might be that he reflected in how many ways he had burnt them.

"What would you advise me to do?" he asked, after a pause, during which he had filled and emptied a goblet of the red wine that stood at his elbow.

"Realize," was the answer. "Realize, and without delay. The game is like tennis, and must be played with the same precision. If your ball be not taken at the first rebound, its force is so deadened that your utmost skill falls short of cutting it over the net.

The Abbé's metaphor, drawn from that fashionable pastime which had been a favourite amusement of the late king, was not without its effect on his listener. Like a skilful practitioner, he suffered his advice to sink into the adept's mind before he took advantage of its effects. In other sciences besides chemistry and cookery, it is well to let your ingredients simmer undisturbed in the crucible till they are thoroughly fused and amalgamated.

He wanted the Signor malleable, and nothing,

he knew by experience, rendered Bartoletti so obliging as a conviction that he lacked means to provide for his self-indulgence. Like the general public, he had been tempted by the great Mississippi scheme, and had invested in its shares the small amount of ready money at his command. It was gradually dawning on him that his speculations would entail considerable loss—that loss he felt, and showed he felt, must be made good; this was the Abbé's opportunity. He could offer his own price now for the co-operation of his friend.

"We are wasting time sadly," said the visitor, after a pause. "Let us go to our studies at once," and he led the way to an inner apartment, as though he had been host and teacher rather than visitor and disciple.

The Signor followed, obedient though unwilling, like a well-trained dog bid to heel by its master.

Malletort turned his cuffs back, seized a small pair of bellows and blew a heap of powdered coal, mingled with other substances, into a deep violet glow.

"By-the-by," he asked, as if suddenly recollecting something of no importance, "have you ever

had any dealings with negroes? Do you know anything of the superstitions of Obi?"

"I know something of every superstition in the world," answered the other, "Christian as well as Pagan, or how could I afford to drink such wine as you tasted in the next room?"

He laughed while he spoke, heartily enough, and so did Malletort, only the mirth of the latter was assumed. He believed in very little, this Abbé, very little indeed, either for good or evil, but he would have liked, if he could, to believe in the Philosopher's stone.

"I have made acquaintance with an Obi-woman lately," pursued he; "she may be useful to us both. I will bring her to see you in a day or two, if you will refresh your mind in the mean time with what you can remember of their mysteries, so as to meet her on equal terms."

Bartoletti looked much relieved, and indeed gratified, when informed that this Obi-woman, instead of being a hideous old negress, was a fine-looking Quadroon.

"Is that all you wanted?" said he, quite briskly; but his countenance fell once more on perceiving that the Abbé made no preparations for departure.

"Not quite," replied the latter. "I am hardly perfect yet in the nature of those essences we studied at my last lesson. Let us go over their powers and properties again."

The Signor turned a shade paler, but taking down some phials, and two or three papers of powders from a shelf, he did as he was bid, and proceeded systematically enough to explain their contents, gaining confidence, and even growing enthusiastic in his subject as he went on.

At the third packet, the Abbé stopped him.

"It is harmless, you say, as a perfume when sprinkled in the form of a powder?"

The Signor nodded.

"But a deadly poison, mixed with three drops of St. Mark's balsam?"

"Right!" assented the Italian.

"And combined with any vegetable substance, its very odour would be dangerous and even fatal to animal life?"

"You are an apt pupil," said the other, not without approval, though he turned paler still.

"It took me seven weeks' close study, and a hundred experiments, to find that out."

"You worked with the glass mask on, of course,"

continued the Abbé; "what would have been the effect had you inhaled the odour?"

"I should have come out in red spots at the first inspiration, turned black at the second, and at the third, Monsieur l'Abbé, should have been lost to the world, to science, and to you," was the conclusive reply.

"I am not quite satisfied yet," said Malletort; "I will take a packet home with me for further examination, if you please, and ten drops of St. Mark's balsam as well."

"It is worth a thousand francs a drop," observed the adept, producing at the same time a tiny sealed phial from a drawer under his hand.

"Of course you name your own price," replied Malletort, snatching up his purchase with impatience, and leaving in its place a purse through which the gold shone temptingly, and which clanked down on the table as if the weight of its lining was satisfactory enough.

The two men seemed to understand each other, for almost before the Signor's grasp was on the purse, his visitor had left the house; but Bartoletti, locking up the drawer, returned to his gaudy sitting-room, with a twitching lip and a cold sweat bursting from his brow.

Till the adept had summoned his theatrical footman, and ordered another flagon of the red wine, he gasped and panted like a man awaking from a nightmare; nor did he recover his equanimity till the flagon was three parts emptied.

By that time, however, he was scarce in a condition to pursue his researches after the Philosopher's stone.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GREY MUSKETEERS.

A BUGLER, thirteen years of age, and about three feet high, a veritable "Child of the Regiment," was blowing "The Assembly" for the Grey Musketeers with a vigour that made itself heard through the adjoining faubourg.

The miniature soldier, who had already smelt powder, strutted and swelled like a bantam-cock. His plumage, too, was nearly as gorgeous, and he seemed more than satisfied with himself and his advantages. In no other country, perhaps, could a combination so ridiculous, yet so admirable, have been found as in this union of innocence and precocity; this simplicity of the child, underlying the bearing of a giant, the courage of a hero, and the coquetry of a girl.

Ten minutes precisely were allowed by the regulations of the late king between the mustering call and the "fall-in," or final summons for the men to take their places in the ranks.

The Musketeers lounged and straggled over their parade-ground, laughing, chatting, bantering each other; fastening here a buckle, there a shoulder-strap, humming snatches of bivouac songs, fixing flints, adjusting belts, and pulling their long moustaches, as they conversed, disrespectfully enough it must be admitted, in hoarse, short murmurs, of Vendôme, Villeroy, Staremberg, Prince Eugene, Malbrook, the great military authorities of the day, and how old Turenne would have *arranged* them one and all.

The Grey Musketeers were so called from their uniform, which, except for its sober hue, shone as splendid as was compatible with the possibility of manœuvring. The men were all veterans; that is to say, had fought through one or more campaigns, so that many a young, delicate face in the ranks was seamed and starred by the shot and shell of the enemy. The majority, however, were grim, and grey, and bronzed; men who could eat ammunition-bread and suttlers' beef without fear of colic; who could sleep round a bivouac fire, and

rise refreshed and ready to be killed; who had looked death in the face and laughed at him in a score of fields.

A large proportion were of noble birth, and all were at home in the drawing-room, the refinements and delicate airs of which it was their affectation to carry with them under fire. They could be rough and outspoken enough, jesting with each other over the wine-cup, or arguing as now while waiting for parade; but put them before an enemy, the nearer the better, and they became lambs—ladies—perfect dancing-masters in the postures and graces they assumed. If the baggage was not too far in the rear, they dressed and scented themselves for a battle as for a ball. They flourished lace handkerchiefs, wore white gloves, and took snuff from gold boxes in the act of advancing to charge a column or to storm a battery. Marlborough's grenadiers had many a tussle with them, and loved them dearly. "Close in, Jack," these honest fellows would say to each other, when they saw the laced hats, with their jaunty grey cockades, advancing through the smoke. "There'll be wigs on the green now—here's *the Dandies* a-coming!"

And in good truth, ere *the Dandies* and they

parted many a comely head was down to rise no more.

There were several companies of these picked troops, distinguished by the different colours of their uniforms. It was their pride to vie with each other in daring, as in extravagance and dissipation. If a post were unusually formidable, a battery in a peculiarly strong position, one or other of these companies, black, red, or grey, would entreat permission to storm it. The Grey Musketeers had of late esteemed themselves very fortunate in opportunities for leaving half their number dead on the field.

They were commanded by the young officer whose acquaintance Madame de Montmirail made during the stag-hunt at Fontainebleau. Captain George, as he was called, had obtained this enviable post, no less by skill and conspicuous bravery, than by great good luck, and perhaps, though last not least, by an affectation of coolness in danger, so exaggerated as to be sublime while it was ridiculous.

The little bugler was waiting for him now. When the ten minutes should have elapsed, and the silver lace on the Captain's uniform come gleaming round the corner, he was prepared to blow

his heroic soul into the mouthpiece of his instrument.

Meanwhile he stood aloof from his comrades. He looked so much taller thus than when oppressed by comparison with those full-grown warriors.

The men were grouped about in knots, talking idly enough on indifferent subjects. Presently the majority gathered round a fresh arrival—a tall, forbidding-looking soldier, with iron-grey moustaches that nearly reached his elbows—who seemed to have some important news to communicate. As the circle of his listeners increased, there was obviously a growing interest and excitement in his intelligence.

"Who is it?" panted one, hurrying up.

"Killed?" asked another, tightening his sword-belt, and twisting his moustaches fiercely to his eyes.

"It's a credit to the bourgeois!" "It's a disgrace to the corps!" exclaimed a couple in a breath; while, "Tell us all about it, Bras-de-Fer!" from half-a-dozen eager voices at once, served to hush the noisy assemblage into comparative silence.

Bras-de-Fer was nothing loth. A pompous old soldier, more of a martinet and less of a dandy perhaps than most of his audience, he loved, above

all things, to hear himself speak. He was a notorious duellist, moreover, and a formidable swordsman, whence the nickname by which he was known amongst his comrades. He entered on his recital with all the zest of a professor.

"I was sitting," said he, with an air of grave superiority, "immediately in front of the coffee-house Louis Quatorze, a little after watch-setting. I was improving my knowledge of my profession by studying the combinations in a game of dominoes. By myself, Adolphe? Yes—right hand against left. Yet not altogether by myself, for I had a bottle of great Bordeaux wine—there is nothing to laugh at, gentlemen—on the table in my front. Flanconnade had just entered, and called for a measure of lemonade, when a street-boy began singing a foolish song about the Regent, with a jingle of "Tra-la-la," "Débonnaire," and some rubbish of that kind. Now this poor Flanconnade, you remember, comrades, never was a great admirer of the Regent. He used to say, we Musketeers of the Guard owed allegiance, first, to the young King, then to the Duc du Maine, lastly, to the Marshal de Villeroy, and that we should take our orders only from those three."

"So we do! So we should!" interrupted a dozen

voices; but Bras-de-Fer, raising a brown, sinewy hand, imposed silence by the gesture, and continued.

"Flanconnade, therefore, was displeased at the air of gasconade with which the urchin sang his song. 'What! thou, too, art a little breechless *roué* of the Regent!' said he, turning round from his drink, and applying a kick that sent the boy howling across the street. There was an outcry directly amongst the cuckold citizens in the coffee-house, half of them, I have no doubt, were grocers and haberdashers in the Regent's employ. 'Shame! shame!' they exclaimed. 'Down with the bully!' 'Long live the Grey Musketeers!' I was up, and had put on my hat, you may well believe, gentlemen, at the first alarm; but with their expression of good-will to the corps, I sat down again and uncovered. It was simply a personal matter for Flanconnade, and I knew no man better able to extricate himself from such an affair. So, leaving the dominoes, I filled my glass and waited for the result. Our friend looked about him from one to the other, like a man who seeks an antagonist, but the bourgeoisie avoided his glance, all but one young man, wrapped in a cloak, who had seemed at first to take little part in the

disturbance. Flanconnade, seeing this, stared him full in the face, and observed, 'Monsieur made a remark? Did I understand clearly what it was?'

"'I said *shame!*' replied the other, boldly. 'And I repeat, Monsieur is in the wrong.'

"By this time the bystanders had gathered round, and I heard whispers of—'Mind what you do; it's a Grey Musketeer; fighting is his trade;' and such friendly warnings; while old Bouchon rushed in with his face as white as his apron, and taking the youth by the arm, exclaimed in trembling accents, 'Do you know what you're about, in Heaven's name? It's Flanconnade, I tell you. It's the fencing-master to the company!'

"Our poor friend appeared so pleased with this homage that I almost thought he would be pacified, but you remember his maxim—'Put yourself in the right first, and then keep your arm bent and your point low.' He acted on it now.

"'Monsieur is prepared for results?' he asked, quietly, and raising the tumbler in his hand, dashed its contents into his antagonist's face.

There was a murmur of applause amongst the Musketeers, for whom such an argument combined

all the elements of reasoning, and Bras-de-Fer proceeded.

"I rose now, for I saw the affair would march rapidly. 'It is good lemonade;' said the young man, licking his lips, while he wiped the liquor from his face. 'Monsieur has given me a lesson in politeness. He will permit me in return to demand five minutes' attention while I teach him to dance.'

"The youth's coolness, I could not but admit, was that of a well-bred man, and surprised me the more because, when he opened his cloak to get at his handkerchief, I perceived he wore no weapon, and was dressed in plain dark garments like a scholar or a priest.

"Flanconnade winked at me. There was plenty of moonlight in the garden behind the coffee-house, but there were two difficulties—the youth had no second and no sword.

"By great good fortune at this moment, in stepped young Chateau-Guerrand of the Duc du Maine's dragoons, with his arm still in a sling, from the wound he received at Brighuega, when serving on his uncle's staff. He had been supping with the Prince-Marshal, and of course was in full-dress, with a rapier at his belt. He accepted

the duty willingly, and lent our youth the weapon he could not use. We measured their swords. They were right to a hair's-breadth, but that the guard of Chateau-Guerrand's hilt was open; and as he and I could not possibly exchange a pass or two for love, we set ourselves to watch the affair with interest, fearing only that Flanconnade's skill would finish with it, almost ere it had well commenced.

"The moon was high and there was a beautiful fighting-light in the garden. At twenty paces I could see the faces of the guests and servants quite distinctly, as they crowded the back-door and windows of the house.

"We placed the adversaries at open distance on the level. They saluted and put themselves on guard.

"The moment I saw the young man's hand up, I knew there would be a fight for it. I observed that his slight frame was exceedingly muscular, and though he looked very pale, almost white in the moonlight, his eyes glittered and his face lost all its gravity when the blades touched. I was sure the rogue loved the steel-clink in his heart.

"Moreover, he must have been *there* before. He

neglected no precaution. He seemed to know the whole game. He bound his handkerchief round his fingers, to make up for Chateau-Guerrand's open sword-hilt, and feeling some inequality of ground beneath his feet, he drew his adversary inch by inch, till he got him exactly level with his point.

"Flanconnade's face showed me that he was aware of his antagonist's force. After two passes, he tried his own peculiar plunging thrust in tierce (I never was quick enough for it myself, and always broke ground when I saw it coming), but this youth parried it in carte. In carte! by heavens! and Flanconnade was too good a fencer to dare try it again."

"In carte!" repeated the listeners with varied accents of interest and admiration. "It's incredible!" "It's beautiful!" "That is *real* fencing, and no sabre-play!" "Go on! Flanconnade had met with his match!"

"More than his match," resumed Bras-de-Fer. "In a dozen passes he was out of breath, and this youth had never moved a foot after his first traverse. I tell you his defence was beautiful: so close you could hardly see his wrist move, and he never straightened his arm but twice. The first time Flanconnade leaped out of distance, for

it was impossible to parry the thrust; although, as far as I could see, he made a simple disengagement and came in outside. But the next time he drew our comrade six inches nearer, and I knew by his face he was as certain as I was that he had got him at last.

"Bah! One—Two! That simple disengagement—a lunge home; and I saw six inches of Chateau-Guerrand's sword through our poor comrade's back ere he went down. The youth wiped it carefully before he returned it, with a profusion of thanks, and found time, while Bouchon and his people gathered round the fallen man, to express his regrets with a perfect politeness to myself.

"'Monsieur,' said he, 'I am distressed to think your friend will not profit by the lesson he has had the kindness to accept. I am much afraid he will never dance again.'"

"And where was the thrust?" asked Adolphe, a promising young fencer, who had been listening to the recital of the duel, open-mouthed.

"Through the upper lungs," answered Bras-de-Fer.

"In five minutes Flanconnade was as dead as Louis Quatorze! Here comes the captain, gentlemen. It is time to fall in."

When he finished speaking, the little bugler blew an astonishing volume of sound through his instrument. The musketeers fell into their places. The line was dressed with military accuracy. The standard of France was displayed; the ranks were opened and Captain George walked through them scanning each individual of that formidable band with a keen rapid glance that would have detected a speck on steel, a button awry, a weapon improperly handled, as surely as such breach of discipline could have been summarily visited with a sharp and galling reprimand. Nevertheless, these men were his own associates and equals; many of them his chosen friends. Hardly one but had interchanged with him acts of courtesy and kindness at the bivouac or on the march. Some had risked life for him; others he had rescued from death in the field. In half an hour all would be on a footing of perfect equality once more; but now, Captain George was here to command, and the rest to obey.

Such was the discipline of the Grey Musketeers. A discipline they were never tired of extolling, and believed to be unequalled in the whole of the armies of Europe.

There was little room for fault-finding in the

order or accoutrements of such troops; and in a short space of time, easily calculated by the by-standers outside, from the arrival of sundry riding-horses and carriages of these gentlemen-privates, to throng the street, their inspection was over—their ranks were closed. The duties for the day, comprising an especial guard for the young king's person, were told off. Bras-de-Fer reported the death of the fencing-master: the commandant observed they must appoint another immediately. The parade was dismissed, and Captain George was at liberty to return to his quarters.

CHAPTER IX.

EUGÈNE BEAUDÉSIR.

IT was no wonder the Marquise de Montmirail, amid the hurry and excitement of a stag-hunt, failed to recognise the merry page who used to play with her child in that stalwart musketeer whom she pressed her eager barb so hard to overtake. The George Hamilton of royal ante-chambers, and palace-stairs, with eyes full of mirth, and pockets full of *bon-bons*, laughing, skipping, agile and mischievous as a monkey, had grown into a strong, fine-looking man, a distingnished soldier, well-known in the army and at Court, as Captain George of the Grey Musketeers. He had dropped the surname of Hamilton altogether now, and nothing remained to him of his nationality and

family characteristics but a certain depth of chest and squareness of shoulder, accompanied by the bold keen glance that had shone even in the boy's eyes, and was not quenched in the man's, denoting a defiant and reckless disposition which, for a woman like the Marquise, possessed some undescribable charm.

As he flung his sword on a couch, and sat down to breakfast in his luxurious quarters—booted, belted, and with his hat on—the man seemed thoroughly in character with the accessories by which he was surrounded. He was the soldier all over—but the soldier adventurer—the soldier of fortune, rather than the soldier of *routine*. The room in which he sat was luxurious indeed and highly ornamented, but the luxuries were those of the senses rather than the intellect; the ornaments consisted chiefly of arms and such implements of warfare. Blades of the finest temper—pistols of exquisite workmanship — saddles with velvet housings and bridle-bits embossed with gold—decked the walls which in more peaceful apartments would have been adorned by pictures, vases, or other works of arts. One or two military maps, and a model of some fortified place in Flanders, denoted a tendency to the theoretical as well as

practical branches of his profession; and a second regimental suit of grey velvet, almost covered with silver lace, hanging on a chair, showed that its gaudier exigencies, so important in the Musketeers, were not forgotten. There were also two or three somewhat incongruous articles littered about amongst the paraphernalia of the soldier—such as a chart of the Caribbean Sea, another of the Channel, with its various soundings pricked off in red ink, a long nautical telescope, and a model of a brigantine more than half rigged. Captain George was possessed of certain seafaring tastes and habits picked up in early life, and to which he still clung with as much of sentiment as was compatible with his character. He was not an impressionable person, this musketeer, but if a foreign shoot could once be grafted on his affections, it took root and became gradually a part of the actual tree itself: then it could neither be torn out nor pruned away. Youthful associations, with such a disposition, attained a power hardly credible to those who only knew the external strength and hardness of the man.

Captain George's predilections, however, seemed to be at present completely engrossed by his breakfast. Venison stakes and a liberal flagon of

Medoc stood before him: he applied himself to each with a vigorous industry that denoted good teeth, good-will, and good digestion. He was so intent on business that a knock at his door was twice repeated ere he answered it, and then the "Come in!" sounded hardly intelligible, hampered as were the syllables by the process of mastication.

At the summons, however, Bras-de-Fer entered, and stood opposite his captain. The latter nodded, pointed to a seat, pushed a plate and wine-cup across the table, and continued his repast.

Bras-de-Fer had already breakfasted once, nevertheless he sat down and made almost as good play as his entertainer for about ten minutes, when they stopped simultaneously. Then Captain George threw himself back in his chair, loosened his belt, undid the two lower buttons of his heavily-laced grey *just-au-corps*, and passing the Medoc, LOW at low ebb, to his comrade, asked abruptly,—

"Have you found him?"

"And brought him with me, my Captain," answered Bras-de-Fer. "He is at this moment waiting outside. 'Tis a queer lad, certainly. He was reading a Latin book when I came upon him. He would have no breakfast, nor even taste a pot.

of wine with me as we walked along. Bah! The young ones are not what they used to be in my time."

"I shouldn't mind a few recruits of your sort still," answered his Captain, good-humouredly; "that thick head of yours is pretty strong, both inside and out: nevertheless, we must take them as we find them, and I should not like to miss a blade that could outmanœuvre poor Flanconnade. If he joins, I would give him the appointment. What think you, Bras-de-Fer? Would he like to be one of us? What did he say?"

"Say!" repeated the veteran. "I couldn't understand half he said—I can't make him out, my Captain. I tell you that I, Bras-de-Fer of the Grey Musketeers, am unable to fathom this smooth-faced stripling. Eyes like a girl's, yet quick and true as a hawk's; white delicate hands, but a wrist of steel, that seems to move by machinery. Such science, too! and such style! Who taught him? Then he rambles so in his talk, and wept when I told him our fencing-master never spoke after that disengagement. Only a simple disengagement, my Captain, he makes no secret of it. I asked him myself. And he wouldn't taste wine—not a mouthful—not a

drop—though I offered to treat him!" and Bras-de-Fer shook his head solemnly, with something of a monkey's expression who has got a nut too hard to crack.

Captain George cut short his friend's reflections by calling for a servant.

"There is a gentleman outside," said he, when the lackey appeared. "Ask his pardon for keeping him waiting, and beg him to step in."

The well-drilled lackey, all politeness, threw the door open for the visitor, who entered with a diffident bow, and a timid hesitating step. Bras-de-Fer could not help remarking how much less assured was his manner now than when he crossed swords last night with the best fencer in the company.

The Musketeers both rose at his entrance, and all three continued standing during the interview.

Captain George scanned the new-comer from head to foot, and from foot to head, as a sergeant inspects a recruit. Its subject blushed painfully during the examination. Then the officer enquired, abruptly—

"You wish to join the Musketeers? As a cadet, of course?"

Something stern in the tone recalled the youth's firmness, and he answered boldly enough—

"Under certain circumstances—yes."

"Your name?"

"Eugène Beaudésir."

"Your age?"

"More than twenty-five."

The Musketeers exchanged looks. He did not appear nearly so much. Captain George continued,—

"Your certificates of baptism, and gentle birth?"

Again the young man changed colour. He hesitated—he looked down—he seemed ill at ease.

"You need not produce these if other particulars are satisfactory," observed the Captain, with a certain rough sympathy which won him a gratitude he little suspected — far more, indeed, than it deserved.

"Reach me that muster-roll, Bras-de-Fer," continued the officer. "We can put his name down, at least for the present, as a cadet. The rest will come in time. But look you, young sir," he added, turning sharply round on the recruit. "Before going through any more formalities, I have still a few questions to ask. Answer them frankly, or decline to answer at all.

The visitor bowed and stole another look in his questioner's face. Frank, romantic, impressionable, he had become strangely prepossessed with this manly, soldier-like captain of musketeers—younger in years than himself, yet so many more steps up the social ladder, he thought, than he could now ever hope to reach.

"I will answer," he said, with a hesitation and simplicity almost boyish, yet engaging in its helplessness,—"if you will promise not to use my answers to my injury, and to take me all the same."

Captain George smiled good-humouredly.

"Once on the roll of the King's Musketeers," he replied, "you are amenable to none but his Majesty and your own officers. As we say ourselves, you need fear neither duke nor devil."

The other looked somewhat relieved, and glancing at Bras-de-Fer, observed timidly,—

"I had a misfortune last night. It was a broil I could not avoid without great dishonour. I killed my adversary, I fear—and—and—he belongs to your company."

"So it is reported to me," answered the Captain, coolly; "and if you are capable, it may perhaps

be your good fortune to find yourself promoted at last into his place."

Beaudésir looked as if he scarcely understood, and Bras-de-Fer gladly seized the opportunity to explain.

"You do not know us yet, young man. In a short time you will be better acquainted with the constitution and discipline of the Grey Musketeers. It is our study, you will find, to become the best fencers in the French army. To this end we appoint our fencing-master by competition, and he is always liable to be superseded in favour of a successful adversary. It cost Flanconnade twenty-three duels to obtain his grade, and, in his last affair (pardon—I should say his *last but one*), he killed his man. You, monsieur, have disposed of Flanconnade scientifically, I must admit, and our captain here is likely enough to promote you to the vacant post."

"Horror!" exclaimed Beaudésir, shuddering. "Like the priests of Aricia!"

It was now Bras-de-Fer's turn to be puzzled, but he rose to the occasion. Quaffing the remains of the Medoc, he nodded approvingly and repeated,

"Like the priests of Aricia. The same system precisely, as established by his Holiness the

Pope. It works remarkably well in the Grey Musketeers."

Beaudésir looked at the Captain, and said in a low, agitated voice,—

"I am most anxious to serve under you. I can be faithful, attentive—above all, obedient. I have no friends, no resources, nothing to care for. I only wish for an honest livelihood and an honourable death."

"We can find you both, I doubt not," answered George, carelessly opening once more the muster-roll of the company. "I have your name down and your age; no further particulars. Where were you educated?"

"In a school of silence, vigilance, self-restraint, and implicit obedience," answered the recruit.

"Good," observed his captain; "but we must put down a name."

"At Avranches, in Normandy," said the other, after a moment's hesitation.

George closed the roll. "Enough for the present," said he; "and now tell me, monsieur, as between friends, where did you learn to fence with so much address?"

"Wherever I could find a foil with a button

on," was the reply. "I never had a naked sword in my hand till last night."

Something in the ready simplicity of such an answer pleased the captain of musketeers, while it interested him still more in his recruit.

"You must be careful of your parries, amongst your new comrades," said he, "at least till you have measured the force of each. I warn you fairly, one-half the company will want to try your mettle, and the other half to learn your secret, even at the cost of an awkward thrust or two. In the meantime, let us see what you can do. There are a brace of foils in the cupboard there. Bras-de-Fer, will you give him a benefit?"

But Bras-de-Fer shook his head. What he had seen the night before had inspired him with an extraordinary respect for the youth's prowess; and being justly vain of his own skill, he was averse to expose his inferiority in the science of defence before his captain. He excused himself, therefore, on the ground of rheumatism, which had settled in an old wound.

Captain George did not press the veteran, but opening the cupboard, pulled out the foils; presented one to his visitor, and put himself in position with the other.

Beaudésir performed an elaborate salute with such grace and precision, as showed him a perfect master of his weapon. He then threw his foil in the air, caught it by the blade, and returned it courteously to the captain.

But George was not yet satisfied. "One assault at least," said he, stamping his right foot. "I want to see if I cannot find a parry for this famous thrust of yours."

The other smiled quietly and took his ground. Though within a few inches of the chamber-door, he seemed to require no more room for his close and quiet evolutions.

Ere they had exchanged two passes, the Captain came over his adversary's point with a rapid flanking movement, like the stroke of a riding-whip, and lending all the strength of his iron wrist to the jerk, broke the opposing foil short off within six inches of the guard. It was the only resource by which he could escape a palpable hit.

"Enough!" he exclaimed, laughing. "There are no more foils in the cupboard, and I honestly confess I should not wish to renew the contest with the real bloodsuckers. You may be perfectly tranquil as regards your comrades, my friend. I do not know a musketeer in the whole guard that

would care to take a lesson from you with the buttons off. What say you, Bras-de-Fer? Come, gentlemen, there is no time to be lost. The Marshal de Villeroy will not yet have left his quarters. Do you, old comrade, take him the fresh appointment for his signature. He never requires to see our recruits till they can wait on him in uniform; and you, young man, come with me to the Rue des Quatre Fripons, where I will myself order your accoutrements, and see you measured for a *just-au-corps*. Recollect, sir, next to their discipline on parade, I am most particular about the clothes of those I have the honour to command. Slovenliness in a Musketeer is a contradiction as impossible as poltroonery; and it is a tradition in our corps that we never insulted Malbrook's Grenadiers by appearing before them in anything but full-dress, or by opening fire until we were close enough for them to mark the embroidery on our waistcoats. I congratulate you, my young friend: you are now a soldier in the pick of that army which is itself the pick of all the armies in the world!"

With such encouraging conversation, Captain George led his lately-enlisted recruit through a variety of winding streets, thronged at that busy

hour with streams of passengers. These, however, for the most part, made way, with many marks of respect, for the officer of Musketeers. The women especially, looking back with unfeigned admiration and interest at the pair, according as they inclined to the stately symmetry of the one or the graceful and almost feminine beauty of the other: perhaps, could they have known that the pale, dark-eyed youth following timidly half a pace behind his leader had only last night killed the deadliest fencer in Paris, they would have wasted no glances even on such a fair specimen of manhood as Captain George, but devoured his comrade with their bold, black eyes, in a thrill of mingled horror, interest, and admiration, peculiar to their sex.

To reach the Rue des Quatres Fripons, it was necessary to pass a barrier lately placed by Marshal de Villeroy's directions, to check the tide of traffic on occasion of the young King's transit through his future capital. This barrier was guarded by a post of Grey Musketeers, and at the moment Captain George approached it, one of his handsomest young officers was performing a series of bows by the door of a ponderous, heavily-gilt family coach, and explaining with considerable volubility his own desolation at the orders which compelled him

to forbid the advance of this unwieldy vehicle. Six heavy coach-horses, two postilions, a coachman, four footmen, and two outriders, armed to the teeth—all jammed together in a narrow street, with a crowd of bystanders, increasing every minute—served to create a sufficient complication, and a very pretty young lady inside, accompanied by one attendant, was already in tears. The attendant, a dark woman with a scarlet turban, scolded and cursed in excellent French, whilst one of the leaders took immediate advantage of the halt, to rear on end and seize his comrade by the crest with a savage and discordant scream.

In such a turmoil, it took George a few moments to recognise Madame de Montmirail's liveries, which he knew perfectly well. To his companion, of course, fresh from Avranches, in Normandy, all liveries in Paris must have been equally strange. Nevertheless, he followed close behind his leader, who pushed authoritatively through the crowd, and demanded what was the matter. The officer of Musketeers, seeing his own captain, fell back from the carriage-door; and Cerise, with her eyes full of tears, found a face she had never forgotten staring in at the window scarcely six inches from her own.

They recognized each other in an instant. For the first sentence it was even "George!" and "Cerise!" Though, of course, it cooled down to "Monsieur" and "Mademoiselle" as they talked on. She was very little altered, he thought, only taller and much more beautiful; while for her, it was the same brave, brown face and kind eyes that she had known by heart since she was a child, only braver, browner, kinder, nobler, just as she had expected. It was wonderful she could see it so distinctly, with her looks cast down on the pretty gloved hands in her lap.

The affair did not take long. "You can pass them by my orders, Adolphe," said his captain; and ere the savage stallion had time for a second attack, the huge vehicle rolled through and lumbered on, leaving handsome Adolphe ejaculating protestations and excuses, believing implicitly that he had won the beautiful mademoiselle's affections at first sight during the process.

Except by this voluble young gentleman, very little had been said. People *do* say very little when they mean a great deal. It seemed to George, mademoiselle had offered no more pertinent remark than that "She had made a long journey, and was going to the Hôtel Montmirail *to stay*."

Whilst Cerise—well, I have no doubt Cerise could have repeated every word of their conversation, yet she did nothing of the kind, neither to Célandine then, nor to mamma afterwards, though by the time she reached home her eyes were quite dry; and no wonder, considering the fire in her cheeks.

Altogether, the interview was certainly provocative of silence. Neither Captain George nor Beaudésir uttered a syllable during the remainder of their walk, only on the threshold of the tailor's shop in the Rue des Quatre Fripons, the latter awoke from a deep fit of musing, and asked very respectfully—

"My Captain, do you think I should have got the best of it this morning if we had taken the buttons off the foils?"

CHAPTER X.

THE BOUDOIR OF MADAME.

THERE was plenty of room in the Hôtel Montmirail when it was opened at night for Madame's distinguished receptions. Its screen of lights in front, its long rows of windows, shedding lustrous radiance on the ground and second floors, caused it to resemble, from outside, the enchanted palace of the White Cat, in that well-known fairy tale which has delighted childhood for so many generations. Within, room after room stretched away in long perspective; one after another, more polished, more decorated, more shining, each than its predecessor. The waiting-room, the gallery, the reception-room, the dining-hall, the two withdrawing-rooms, all with floors inlaid by the most

elaborate and slippery of wood-work, all heavy with crimson velvet and massive gilding, in the worst possible taste, all adorned by mythological pictures, bright of colour, cold of tone, and scant of drapery, led the oppressed and dazzled visitor to Madame's bed-chamber, thrown open like every other apartment on the floor for *his* or *her* admiration. Here the eye reposed at last, on flowers, satin, ivory, mirrors, crystal, china—everything most suggestive of the presence of beauty, its influence, and the atmosphere that seems to surround it in its home. The bed, indeed, with lofty canopy, surmounted by ciphers and coronets, was almost solemn in its magnificence; but the bath of Madame, her wardrobe, above all, her toilet-table, modified with their graceful, glittering elegance the oppressive grandeur of this important article in a sleeping-apartment.

At each of the four corners strips of looking-glass reached from ceiling to floor, while opposite the bed, the first object on which Madame's eyes rested in waking, was a picture that conveyed much delicate and appropriate flattery to herself.

It represented the Judgment of Paris. That dangerous shepherd of Mount Ida was depicted

in appropriate costume of brown skin, laughing eyes, a crook, and a pair of sandals, with a golden apple in his hand. Juno stood on one side—Minerva on the other. The ox-eyed goddess, with her rich colouring and radiant form, affording a glowing type of those attractions which are dependent on the senses alone; while Minerva's deep-grey eyes, serene, majestic air, and noble, thoughtful brow, seemed to promise a triumph, glorious in proportion to the wisdom and intellect to be overcome.

Paris stood between them, somewhat in front of the immortal rivals, his right arm skilfully foreshortened, and offering the apple—to whom? To neither of these, but to the Marquise, as she got out of bed every morning, thereby inferring that *she* was the Olympian Venus, the Queen of Love and Beauty both for gods and men!

Malletort, in his many visits to the Hôtel Montmirail, never passed this picture without a characteristic grin of intense amusement and delight.

Traversing the bed-chamber, one arrived at last in a small apartment, which concluded the series, and from which there appeared no further egress, though, in truth, a door, concealed in the panelling,

opened on a narrow staircase, which descended to the garden. This room was more plainly furnished than the others, but an air of comfort pervaded it that denoted the owner's favourite retreat. Its tables were littered, its furniture was worn. The pens and portfolio were disordered; a woman's glove lay near the inkstand; some half-finished embroidery occupied the sofa; and a sheet of blotted music had fallen on the floor. There was no kind of mirror in any part of the apartment. It was an affectation of the Marquise, pardonable enough in a handsome woman, to protest that she hated the reflection of her own features; and this little chamber was her favourite retreat—her inner citadel—her sanctuary of seclusion—or, as the servants called it, the Boudoir of Madame.

It was undoubtedly the quietest room in the house, the farthest removed from the noise of the courtyard, the domestics, even their guests. Profound silence would have reigned in it now, but for the ring of a hooked hard beak drawn sharply at intervals across a row of gilt wires, and a ghastly muttering, like that of a demoniac, between whisper and croak, for the encouragement of somebody or something named "Pierrot."

It was Madame's West Indian parrot, beguil-

ing his solitude by the conscientious study of his part. Presently the bird gave a long shrill whistle, for he heard a well-known step on the garden stair, and his mistress's voice singing—

"Non, je te dis
Ma sœur, c'est lui,
C'est mon Henri,
A l'habit gris
Des Mousquetaires, des Mousquetaires,
Des Mousquetaires
Du roi Louis.

"Amant gentil
Qui chante, qui rit,
Joli, poli,
Fidèle? Mais, Oui
Comme Mousquetaire, comme Mousquetaire,
Comme Mousquetaire
Du roi Louis."

At which conclusive point in its argument Pierrot interrupted the ballad with a deafening shriek, and Madame, sliding the panel back, passed into the apartment.

She was dressed in a simple morning toilet of white, with scarlet breast-knots and a ribbon of the same colour, gathering the shining masses of her black hair. It suited her well. Even Pierrot, gazing at her with head on one side, and upturned eye, seemed to be of this opinion, though bigger and better talkers, by rote, had probably

long ago informed her of the fact. She had a large bouquet of flowers, fresh gathered, in her hand, and she gave the bird a caressing word or two as she moved through her boudoir, disposing of them here and there to the best advantage; then she selected a few of the rarest, and put them carefully in water, telling the parrot "these are for Cerise, Pierrot," and endeavouring to make it repeat her daughter's name. Of course, without success, though on other occasions this refractory pupil would shriek these well-known syllables, time after time, till the very cook, far off in the basement, was goaded to swear hideously, wishing in good Gascon he had the accursed fowl picked and trussed and garnished with olives in the stew-pan.

Cerise had been brought back from her pension in Normandy, as we have seen, partly by Malletort's advice, partly because her mother longed to have the girl by her side once more. They had been inseparable formerly; and it is possible she was conscious, without confessing it, that her whole character deteriorated during her daughter's absence. So the heavy family coach, postilions, out-riders, footmen and all, rolled into the court-yard of the Hôtel Montmirail, after a slight delay,

as we have seen, at one of the Barriers, and deposited its freight to the great jubilation of the whole household. These were never tired of praising mademoiselle's beauty, mademoiselle's grace—her refinement, her manners, her acquirements, her goodness of heart, were on every lip. But though she said less about it than the domestics, nobody in her establishment was so alive to the merits of Cerise as her mother. In good truth, the Marquise loved her daughter very dearly. She never thought she could love anything half so much, except—except perhaps, the germ of a new idea that had lately been forming itself in her heart, and of which the vague shadowy uncertainty, the shame, the excuses, the unwillingness with which she acknowledged it, constituted no small portion of the charm. Is it possible that Love is painted blind because, if people could see before them, they would never be induced to move a step along the pleasant path? The pleasant path that leads through cool shades and clustering roses, down the steep bank where the nettles grow, through briar and bramble, to end at last in a treacherous morass, whence extrication is generally difficult, sometimes impossible, and always unpleasant. Nevertheless, to get Cerise

back from her pension, to find that she had grown into a woman, yet without losing the child's blue eyes, fond and frank and innocent as ever—to watch her matured intellect, to feel that the plaything was a companion now, though playful and light-hearted still—lastly, to discover that she was a beauty, but a beauty who could never become a rival, because in quite a different style from her mother—all this was very delightful, and the Marquise, seldom low-spirited at any time, had become perfectly sparkling since her daughter came home.

So she carolled about the boudoir like a girl, coaxing Pierrot, arranging the flowers, and warning Célandine, between the notes of her foolish love-song, not to let mademoiselle's chocolate get cold. Mademoiselle, you see, was tired and not yet down; indeed, to tell the truth, not yet up, but pressing a soft flushed cheek against her laced pillow, having just awoke from a dream, in which she was back at the convent in Normandy once more, sauntering down the beech-walk with her director, who somehow, instead of a priest's habit, wore the uniform of the Grey Musketeers, an irregularity that roused the wrath of the Lady Superior, and bade her speak out freely; whereat

the Musketeer took his pupil's part, looking down on her with a brave brown face and kind eyes, while he clasped her hand in fond assurance of his aid. Waking thus, she tried hard to get back to sleep, in hopes of dreaming it all over again.

The mother, meanwhile, having disposed her chamber to her liking, sank into the recesses of a deep arm-chair, and began to speculate on her daughter's future. It is not to be supposed that such an important consideration as the child's marriage now occupied her attention for the first time: indeed, her habits, her education, the opinions of that society in which she lived, even her own past, with its vicissitudes and experiences, seemed to urge on her the necessity of taking some step towards an early settlement in life for her attractive girl. Cerise was beautiful, no doubt, thought the Marquise; not indeed in her mother's wicked, provoking style, of which that mother well knew the power, but with the innocent beauty of an angel. At such a Court, it was good she should be provided as soon as possible with a legitimate protector. Of suitors there would be no lack, for two strains of the best blood in France united in the person of this fair damsel, whose wealth, be-

sides, would make her a desirable acquisition to the noblest gentleman in the realm. Then she reviewed in turn all the eligible matches she could think of in the large circle of her acquaintance; scanning them mentally, one after another, with the proverbial fastidiousness that, looking for a perfectly straight stick, traverses the wood from end to end in vain. The first man was too young, the second too old, a third too clever, a fourth too stupid. Count Point d'Appui had been hawked at by all the beauties in Paris, and owned half Picardy; but she was afraid of him. No, she could not trust him with her Cerise. He was worn out, debauched, one of the roués, and worse than the Regent! Then there was the Marquis de la Force Manquée, he would have been the very thing, but he had sustained a paralytic stroke. Ah! she knew it. The family might hush it up, talk of a fall in hunting, a shock to the system, a cold bath after exercise, but Fagon had told her what it was. The late king's physician should understand such matters, and she was not to be deceived! To be sure, there was still the Duc de Beau-blafard left—noble rank, tolerable possessions, easy temper, and a taste for the fine arts. She wavered a long time, but decided

against him at last. "It is a pity!" said the Marquise in a half-whisper, shaking her head, and gazing thoughtfully at Pierrot. "A thousand pities! but I dare not risk it. He is too good-looking — even for a lover — decidedly for a husband!"

It was strange that, with her knowledge of human nature, her experience, by observation at least, of human passions, she should so little have considered that person's inclinations who ought to have been first consulted in such a matter; she never seemed to contemplate for an instant that Cerise herself might shrink from the character of the Count, appeal against becoming sick-nurse to the Marquis, or incline to the excessive and objectionable beauty of the Duke. It seemed natural the girl should accept her mother's choice just as that mother had herself accepted, without even seeing him, the chivalrous old Montmirail whom she had so cherished and respected, whose snuffbox stood there under glass on her writing-table, and for whom, though he had been dead more years than she liked to count, she sometimes felt as if she could weep even now.

Such a train of reflection gradually brought the Marquise to her own position in life, and a calcula-

tion of the advantages and disadvantages attendant on marriage as regarded herself. She could not but know she was in the full meridian of her beauty. Her summer, so to speak, was still in its July, the fruit, bright, glowing, and mature; not a leaf yet changed in colour with forewarning of decay. She might take her choice of a dozen noble names, whenever she would, and she felt her heart beat while she wondered why this consideration should of late have been so often present to her mind. It could only arise from an anxiety to settle Cerise, she argued with herself; there *could* be no other reason. Impossible! absurd! No—no—a thousand times—No!

She went carefully back over her past life, analyzing, with no foolish, romantic tendencies, but in a keen, impartial spirit, the whole history of her feelings. She acknowledged, with a certain hard triumph, that in her young days she had never loved. Likings, flirtations, passing fancies she had indulged in by hundreds, a dozen at a time, but to true feminine affection her nearest approach had been that sentiment of regard which she entertained for her husband. She did not stop to ask herself if this was love, as women understand the word.

And was she to be always invulnerable? Was she indeed incapable of that abstraction, that self-devotion which made the happiness and the misery of nearly all her sex? She *did* ask herself this question, but she did *not* answer it, though Pierrot, still watching her out of one eye, must have seen her blush.

Certainly, none of her declared suitors had hitherto inspired it—least of all he to whom the world had lately given her as his affianced wife. Brave he was, no doubt, chivalrous in thought and action; stupid enough besides—yes, quite stupid enough for a husband! generous too, and considerate—but oh! not like the kind, unselfish, indulgent old heart she mourned for in widow's weeds all those years ago. She could almost have cried again now, and yet she laughed when she thought of the united ages of her late husband and her present adorer. Was it her destiny, then, thus ever to captivate the affections of old men? and were their wrongs to be avenged at last by her own infatuation for a lover many years younger than herself? Again the burning blushes rose to her brow? and though Pierrot was the only witness present, she buried her face in her hands.

Lifting her eyes once more, they rested on a picture that held the place of honour in her boudoir. It was a coloured drawing of considerable spirit, and had been given her by no less a favourite than the Prince-Marshal himself, for whose glorification it had been executed by a rising artist.

It represented a battle-field, of which the Prince de Chateau-Guerrand constituted the principal object; and that officer was portrayed, with considerable fidelity, advancing to the súccour of the Count de Guiches, who at the head of the Guards was covering Villeroy's retreat before Marlborough at Ramilies. Two or three broad, honest faces of the English grenadiers came well out from the smoke and confusion in the background, ingeniously increased, by a fall of rafters, and conflagration of an imaginary farm-house; but the Count de Guiches, himself, occupied no prominent place in the composition, dancing about on a little grey horse in one corner, as if studious not to interfere with the dominant figure, who was, indeed, the artist's patron, and who presided over the whole in a full-bottomed wig, with a conceited smile on his face, and a laced hat in his hand. There lay, also, a dead Musketeer in the foreground, admirably

contrived to impart reality to the scene of conflict, and it was on this figure that the eyes of the Marquise fixed themselves, devouring it with a passionate gaze, in which admiration, longing, self-scorn, and self-reproach, seemed all combined.

For a full minute the wild, pitiful expression never left her face, and during that minute she tore her handkerchief to the coronet near its hem. Then she rose and paced the room for a couple of turns, restless as a leopard; but ere she had made a third, footsteps were heard approaching through the bed-chamber. The door opened, and one of her servants announced "Monsieur l'Abbé Malletort!"

CHAPTER XI.

WHAT THE SERPENT SAID.

HE came in smiling, of course. When was the Abbé to be caught without his self-possessed smile, his easy manner and his carefully-arranged dress? On the present occasion he carried with him some rare flowers as well. The Marquise sprang at them almost before he had time to offer his elaborate homage, while he bent over her extended hand. He snatched the nosegay away, however, with great quickness, and held it behind his back.

"Pardon, Madame," said he, "this is forbidden fruit. As such I bring it into the garden of Paradise; where my cousin dwells, there is Eden, and the resemblance is the more striking that neither here are found mirrors to offend me with

the reflection of my own ugly face. Consequently, my attention is concentrated on yourself. I look at you, Marquise, as Adam looked at Eve. (Bah! that father of horticulture was but a husband). I should rather say, as the subtle creature who relieved their domestic *tête-à-tête* looked at the lady presiding over that charming scene. I look at you, I say, with delight and admiration, for I find you beautiful!"

"And is it to tell me this important news that you are abroad so early?" asked the Marquise, laughing gaily, while she pointed to the easy-chair she had just left. "Sit down, Monsieur l'Abbé, and try to talk sense for five minutes. You can be rational, none more so, when you choose. I want your opinion—nay, I even think I want your advice. Mind, I don't promise to take it, that of course!—Don't look so interested. It's not about myself. It's about Cerise."

"How can I look anything else?" asked the Abbé, whose face, to do him justice, never betrayed his thoughts or feelings. "Madame, or Mademoiselle, both are near and dear to me—too much so for my own repose."

He sighed, and laid his white hand on his breast. She was so accustomed to his manner

that she never troubled herself whether he was in jest or earnest. Moreover, she was, at present, engrossed with her daughter's future, and proceeded thoughtfully.

"Cerise is a woman now, my cousin. Her girlhood is past, and she has arrived at an age when every woman should think of establishing herself in life. Pardon! that bouquet is in your way, put it down yonder in the window-sill."

The Abbé rose and placed the flowers in the open window, whence a light air from without wafted their sweet and heavy perfume into the apartment.

When he reseated himself, the Marquise had relapsed into silence. She was thinking deeply, with her eyes fixed on the dead musketeer in the picture.

The Abbé spoke first. He began in a low tone of emotion, that, if fictitious, was admirably assumed.

"It is not for *me*, perhaps, Madame, to give an opinion on such matters as concern the affections. For *me*, the churchman, the celibate, the man of the world, whose whole utility to those he loves depends on subjection of his love at any cost—at any sacrifice; who must trample his feelings under

foot, lest they rise and vanquish him, putting him to torture, punishment, and shame. My cousin, have not I seemed to you a man of marble rather than a creature of flesh and blood?"

The Marquise opened her black eyes wide. He had succeeded at least in rousing her attention, and continued in the same low, hurried voice:

"Can you not make allowance for a position, so constrained and unnatural as mine? Can you not comprehend a devotion that exists out of and apart from self? Is not the hideous satyr peering from behind his tree at the nymph whose beauty awes him from approach, an object more touching, more to be respected than vain Narcissus, languishing after all, but for the mere reflection of himself? Is not that a true and faithful worship which seeks only the elevation of its idol, though its own crushed body may be exacted to raise the pedestal, if but by half a foot? Do you believe—I ask you, my cousin, in the utmost truth and sincerity—do you believe there breathes a man on earth so completely consecrated to your interests as myself?"

"You have always been a kind counsellor—and —and—an affectionate kinsman," answered the Marquise, a little confused, adding with an air of frankness that became her well, — "Come! Abbé,

you are a good friend, neither more nor less, stanch, honest, constant. You always have been, you always will be. Is it not so?"

His self-command was perfect. His face betrayed neither disappointment, vexation, nor wounded pride. His voice retained just so much of tremor as was compatible with the warm regard of friendship, yet not too little to convey the deeper interest of love. He did not approach his cousin by an inch. He sat back in the arm-chair, outwardly composed and tranquil, yet he made it appear that he was pleading a subject of vital importance both to her welfare and his own.

"Pass over *me*, Madame!" he exclaimed, throwing both his white hands up with a conclusive gesture. "Walk over *my* body without scruple if it will keep you dry-shod. Why am I here, nay, why do I exist at all but to serve you—and yours? Nevertheless, it is not now a question of the daughter's destiny,—that will arrive in course of time,—it is of the mother I would speak. For the mother, I would plead, even against myself. What temptation is there in the world like ambition? What has earth to offer compared to its promises? The draught of love may be, nay, I feel too keenly, *must* be very sweet, but what

bitter drops are mingled in the cup! Surely I know it; but what matters its taste to me? the Abbé! the priest! Marquise, you have a future before you the proudest woman in Europe might envy. That fair hand might hold a sceptre, that sweet brow be encircled by a crown. Bah! they are but baubles, of course," continued the Abbé, relapsing without a moment's warning into his usual tone; "the one would make your arm ache and the other your head; nevertheless, my cousin, you could endure these inconveniences without complaint, perhaps even with patience and resignation to your fate?"

The Marquise, it must be confessed, was relieved at his change of tone. Her feelings had been stimulated, her sympathies enlisted, and now her curiosity was aroused. This last quality is seldom weak in her sex; and the Abbé, though it is needless to inquire where or how he learned the trade, was far too experienced a practitioner to neglect so powerful an engine as that desire for knowledge, which made shipwreck of Eve and is the bane of all her daughters. Madame de Montmirail was proud—most women are. She loved power—most women do. If a thought flashed through her mind that the advancement of her own position

might benefit those in whom she felt interest, what was this but a noble instinct, unselfish as are all the instincts of womanhood?

"You speak in parables, my good Abbé," said she, with a laugh that betrayed some anxiety to know more. "You talk of crowns and sceptres as familiarly as I do of fans and bracelets. You must expound to me what you mean, for I am one of those who find out a riddle admirably when they have been told the answer."

"I will instruct you, then," was his reply, "in the form of a parable. Listen and learn:—A certain sultan had a collection of jewels, and he changed them from time to time—because he could not find a gem that sparkled with equal brilliance by day and by night. So he consulted every jeweller in his dominions, and squandered great sums of money, both in barter and in a search for what he required. Nay, he would trample under foot and defile the treasures he possessed, passionate, languishing, wretched, for want of that he possessed not. So his affairs went to ruin, and his whole country was in want and misery.

"Now a Dervish praying at sunset by a fountain, saw a beautiful bird fly down to the water to drink. Between its eyes grew a jewel that flamed and

glittered like the noonday sun on the Sultan's drawn scimitar. And the Dervish bethought him, this jewel would be a rare addition to the collection of his lord; so he rolled his prayer-carpet into a pillow, and went to sleep by the side of the fountain, under a tree.

"At midnight the Dervish woke up to pray, and on the branch above his head he saw something flash and sparkle like the sun on the Sultan's scimitar at noonday. So he said 'This is the gem for which my lord pineth. Lo! I will take the bird captive, and bring it with me to the feet of my lord.'

"Then the Dervish took the bird craftily with his hand, and though the fowl was beautiful, and the gem was precious, he kept neither of them for himself, but brought them both to his lord, to be the delight of the Sultan, and the salvation of the land."

"And suppose the poor bird would rather have had her liberty?" replied the Marquise; "it seems to me that in their dealings with men the birds get the worst of it from first to last."

"This bird was wise in her generation, as the goose that saved Rome," answered the Abbe; "but the bird I have in my thoughts wants only

opportunity to soar her pitch, like the falcon, Queen of Earth and Air. Seriously, Madame—look at the condition of *our* Sultan. I speak not of the young king, a weak and rickety boy, with all respect be it said, ill in bed at this very moment, perhaps never to leave his chamber alive. I mean the Regent, my kind patron. Your devoted admirer—the true ruler of France. And look at the jewels in his casket. Do you think there is one that he prizes at the value of a worn-out glove?"

The subject possessed a certain degree of interest, trenching though it was upon very delicate ground.

"He has plenty to choose from, at any rate," observed the Marquise; "and I must say I cannot compliment him on the taste he has displayed in these valuables," she added, with a mischievous laugh.

"He would throw them all willingly into the Seine to-morrow," continued Malletort, "might he but possess the gem he covets, and set it in the Crown-royal of France. Yes, Madame, the Crown-royal, I repeat it. Where are the obstacles? Louis XV. may not, will not, nay, perhaps, *shall* not live to be a man. Madame d'Orléans inherits the feeble constitution, without the beauty of her

mother, Madame de Montespan. Fagon himself will tell you her life is not worth nine months' purchase; and since she has quarrelled with her daughter, she has less interest with the Regent than one of the pages. Her party is no longer in power, the Comte de Toulouse is in disgrace, the Duc du Maine is in disgrace. Illegitimacy is at a discount, though, *parbleu*, it has no want of propagators in our day. To speak frankly, my cousin, a clever woman who could influence the Regent might sway the destinies of the whole nation in six weeks,—might be Queen of France in six months from this time."

The Marquise listened, as Eve may have listened to the serpent, when he pressed her to taste the apple. For different palates, the fruit, tempting, because forbidden, assumes different forms. Sometimes it represents power, sometimes pique, sometimes lucre, and sometimes love. According to their various natures, the tempted nibble at it with their pretty teeth, suck it eagerly with clinging lips, or swallow it whole, like a bolus, at a gulp. The Marquise was only nibbling, but her cheek glowed, her eyes shone, and she whispered below her breath, "The Queen of France;" as if there was music in the very syllables.

The Abbé paused to let the charm work, ere he resumed in his half-jesting way.

"The Queen, Madame!—Despite the injustice of our Salic law, you may say *the King!*—Such a woman, and I know well of whom I speak, would little by little obtain all the real power of the crown. She might sway the council—she might rule the parliament—she might control the finances—in and out of the palace she would become the dispenser of rank, the fountain of honour. Nay," he added with a laugh, "she might usurp the last privileges of royalty, and command the very musketeers of the guard themselves!"

Did he know that he had touched a string to vibrate through his listener's whole being? She rose and walked to the window, where the flowers were, while at the same moment he prepared to recall her hastily; it was needless, for she started, turning very pale, and came quietly back to her seat. The Abbé's quick ear detected the tramp of a boot, crunching the gravel walk outside, but it was impossible to gather from his countenance whether he suspected the passer-by to be of more importance than one of the gardeners. The Marquise, however, had caught a glimpse of a figure, she was beginning to know by heart too

well. Captain George had of late, indeed ever since Cerise came home, contracted a habit of traversing the gardens of the Hotel Montmirail to visit a post of his musketeers in the neighbourhood. These guards were permitted to enter everywhere, and Madame de Montmirail was the last person to interfere, in this instance, with their privileges. So little annoyance, indeed, did she seem to experience from the intrusion, that the windows of her boudoir were generally wide open at this hour of the day. Though to visit this post might be a necessary military precaution, it was obviously a duty requiring promptitude less than consideration. Captain George usually walked slowly through the garden, and returned in a very short time at the same deliberate pace. The Marquise knew perfectly well that it took him exactly ten minutes by the clock in her boudoir. When she sat down again, Malletort, without noticing her movement or her confusion, proceeded in a sincere and affectionate tone,—

"I need not explain more clearly, Madame; I need not urge my motives, nor dwell upon my own self-sacrifice. It is sufficient for the Abbé to see his peerless cousin set out on her journey to fame, and to feel that he has indicated the shortest

path. There are obstacles, no doubt; but for what purpose do obstacles exist save to be surmounted, or swept away? Let us take them as they come. I can count them all on the fingers of my hand." The Abbé began systematically at his thumb. "The young King and Madame d'Orleans are already disposed of, or, at worst, soon will be, in the common course of events. Remain—the *Roués*—Madame de Sabran, and Madame Parabére. Of these I can manage the first without assistance. I have influence with the whole gang. Some may be persuaded, others intimidated, all can be bribed. I anticipate no opposition worth speaking of from the male element, fond of pleasure, fond of wine, and embarrassed as they are good-for-nothing. With the last two, it is different: Madame de Sabran is witty, handsome, and well-bred; but she spares no person, however exalted, in her sarcasm, and the Regent fears her tongue, while he is oppressed with her society. One or two more of her cutting sayings, and she will sever the cord, already frayed very thin, by which she holds on to fortune. Then she becomes but yesterday's *bouquet*, and we need trouble ourselves no more with *her!* Exit Madame de Sabran. Enter,—whom shall we name my

beautiful cousin? Whoever it is, will have it in her power to become Queen of France. Now there is only Madame de Parabére left, but alas! she is the most dangerous and the most powerful of all. It is against *her* that I must ask you, Madame, to lend me your assistance."

"Mine!" repeated the Marquise, half surprised and half unwilling, though with no especial liking for the lady in question. "Mine! what can I do?"

"Much," replied Malletort, earnestly. "Indeed, everything! Yet, it is very little I will ask you to undertake, though it must eventually lead to the greatest results. Listen:—The Regent, while he has confessed to me over and over again that he grows weary of Madame de Parabére, is yet fascinated by her beauty. The beauty, after all, of a baby-face with a skin like cream. Such beauty as even the devil must have possessed when he was young. She has neither wit, nor grace, nor intellect, nor form, nor even features. But she has her *skin*, and that I must admit is wonderfully clear and soft. This attraction possesses some incredible fascination for the Duke. If she went out in the sun to-morrow and came home tanned, *adieu* to her power for ever! I cannot make her go out in

the sun, but I think if you will help me I can arrange that she shall become tanned—ay, worse than tanned, speckled all over like a toad. Do you remember once when they praised your beauty at the late King's dinner, she said, "Yes, you were very well for a mulatto?"

"I have not forgotten it!" replied the Marquise, and her flashing eye showed that neither had she forgiven the offence.

"That little compliment alone would make me her enemy," continued the Abbé, "if I allowed myself such luxuries as likes and dislikes; but she is in our way, and that is a far better reason for putting her aside. Now my beautiful cousin has admired those flowers in the window more than once. She thinks they are an offering from her faithful kinsman. It is not so, I have procured them with no small trouble for Madame de Parabére."

"Then why bring them here?" asked the Marquise, with a spice of pardonable pique in her tone.

"Because if I sent them to her with the compliments of Monsieur l'Abbé Malletort, the Swiss would probably not take them in; because if I offered them to her myself, I, the cynic, the unimpressionable, the man of marble, who has eyes

but for his kinswoman, she would suspect a trick, or perhaps some covert insult or irony that would cause her to refuse the gift point-blank. No, my plan is better laid. You go to the masked ball at the opera to-night. She will be there on the Regent's arm. Jealous, suspicious, domineering, she will never leave him. There is not another petal of stephanotis to be procured for love or money within thirty leagues of Paris; I have assured myself of this. They are her favourite flowers. You will appear at the ball with your *bouquet*, but for the love of heaven, my cousin," and the Abbé's countenance was really in earnest while he thus adjured her, "do not, even with a mask on, put it within six inches of your face!"

"It is poisoned!" exclaimed the Marquise, walking nevertheless, to the open window where the flowers stood. "Poisoned! I will have nothing to do with it. If we were men, I would force her to cross swords with me, on the turf down there. But poison! No, my cousin. I tell you no. Never!"

"Poison is entirely a relative term," observed the Abbé, philosophically. "All drugs in excess become poisons. These pretty flowers are not poisoned so much as medicated. There is no danger to life in smelling them—none. But their

effect on the skin is curious, really interesting from a scientific point of view. A few hours after inspiration even of one leaf, the complexion loses its freshness, fades, comes out in spots,—turns brown."

The Marquise listened attentively.

"Brown! Deep brown. Browner than any mulatto!"

The Marquise wavered.

"It really would not be a bad joke, and I think she deserves it for what she said of you."

The Marquise consented.

"I will take them to the ball," said she, "and if Madame de Parabére asks for them, why, in common politeness, she must have them. But mask or no mask, I will take care to let her know who I *am!*"

"Better not," said the more cautious Abbé, and would have explained why, but the Marquise paid no attention to what he said. She seemed uneasy, and moved behind the window-curtain with a nervous gesture and a rising colour in her cheek. "Another complication," muttered her companion, catching once more the measured boot-tramp on the gravel-walk. "So be it! The more cards dealt, the better chance for the player who can peep at his adversary's hand."

Looking into the garden, he perceived the Musketeer's tall figure moving leisurely along the walk. His pace became slower and slower, and the Marquise behind the curtain, blushed deeper and deeper as he came directly below the window, peering up at the house with an air of caution, not lost on Malletort's observation.

"I will force one of them to play a court card," thought the Abbé, and muttering something about "stifling heat," pushed the window noisily, as far open as it would go.

The Musketeer looked quickly up, and at the same moment something white and buoyant fluttered lightly to the ground at his very feet.

The Marquise was trembling and blushing behind her window-curtain.

The ruffles at Malletort's wrist had brushed a cluster of blossoms from the stephanotis, and it fell within six inches of Captain George's boot.

He picked it up with a murmur of delight. In another moment he would have pressed it to his lips, but the Marquise could keep silence no longer. Shrouding herself in the window-curtain, she exclaimed in a hoarse whisper, "Hold! Monsieur, in Heaven's name! It is poisoned!"

He cast a rapid penetrating glance, up, down, all

round. His monitress was invisible, and the Abbé had shrunk back into the room. Then he examined the blossoms minutely though at arm's-length, holding them in his gloved hand, and so twirling them carelessly about, as if to avoid observation, went on a few paces ere he threw them on the walk and crushed them to pieces beneath his heel. For two minutes Madame Montmirail had been hot and cold by turns, giddy, choking—the Abbé, the room, the gardens, swimming before her eyes—now she drew a long breath of relief, and turned to her cousin.

"By my faith, Monsieur l'Abbé," said she, "that soldier down there is a true gentlemen!"

And Malletort took his leave, reflecting that in research after general information, his last hour's work had been by no means thrown away.

CHAPTER XII.

OUT-MANŒUVRED.

CAPTAIN GEORGE was not the only soldier of France whom a visit to the Hôtel Montmirail affected that morning with the slighter and premonitory symptoms of fever, such as dry mouth, irregular pulse, and a tendency to flush without physical exertion. While the Musketeer was visiting his out-posts in anything but a warlike frame of mind, his former general was working his temper up to a state of nervous irritation more trying than usual to the valets and other domestics of his household. The Prince-Marshal busied himself to-day with preparations for his grand attack; and, contrary to the whole practice of his life-time, in the event of failure, had made no disposition for retreat.

He felt, indeed, a good deal more agitated now than when he led a forlorn hope of Black Musketeers at twenty, an exploit from which he came off with three flesh wounds and a broken collar-bone, owing to the usual mistake of too short a scaling-ladder; but he consoled himself by reflecting how this very agitation denoted that the fountain of youth was not yet dried up in his heart.

He rose early, though he could not decently present himself at the Hôtel Montmirail for hours to come. He stormed and swore because his chocolate was not ready, though he hardly tasted it when it was served, and indeed broke his fast on yolk of egg and pounded sugar, mixed up with a small glass of brandy.

This stimulating refreshment enabled him to encounter the fatigue of dressing; and very careful the veteran was to marshal his stanch old forces in their most imposing array.

The few teeth he could boast were polished up white and glistening. Their ranks indeed had been sadly thinned; but, like the last survivors of a beleaguered garrison, though shattered and disordered, they mustered bravely to the front. His wrinkled cheeks and pointed chin were shaved trim and smooth, while the moustache on his upper lip,

though nearly white, was carefully clipped and arranged in the prevailing fashion. More than once during the progress of the toilet before a mirror which he cursed repeatedly for a dull and unbecoming glass, his heart misgave him, and he treated his valets to a few camp compliments current amongst the old *die-hards* of Turenne ; but when at last his cravat was fastened—his frills adjusted, his *just-au-corps* fitted on, his delicate ruffles pulled over his wasted hands, with their swollen knuckles and magnificent rings, his diamond-hilted rapier hung exactly at his hip, and his laced hat, cocked jauntily *à la Mousquetaire*, he took one approving survey in the mirror, unbecoming as it was, and marched forth confident and resolved to conquer.

His carriage was waiting for him at the porter's lodge of his hotel. A nobleman of those days seldom walked afoot in the streets, and it took four horses at least, one coachman, one postilion, and two or three footmen in laced coats, to convey a single biped the distance of a couple of hundred mètres.

As the door of his heraldry-covered coach closed on him with a "bang," quoth Auguste, who had dressed him, to Etienne who had handed the

clothes, and shared impartially in his master's malédictions,—

"Come, that's not so bad, Etienne! Hein?—What would you have at sixty-three? And without *me*, bones of St. Martin! what is he? A monkey, a skeleton, a heap of rags and refuse! Ah! What it is! the toilet! When a man is really master of his work."

The Prince-Marshal, you see, like other heroes was none to his valet-de-chambre; but Auguste, a true artist, having neglected none of the *minutiæ* on which success depended, looked to general results, and exulted in the master-piece that he felt was a creation of his own genius.

Now it fell out that the Prince de Chateau-Guerrand, hereditary grand chasseur to the King, master of the horse to the Dauphin, state exon to the sons and daughters of France, Marshal of its armies, and chevalier of half-a-dozen orders in his own and other countries, with no decoration on earth left to wish for but the Golden Fleece of Spain, which he coveted greedily in consequence, and prized above them all, arrived at the Hôtel Montmirail almost in the moment when Abbé Malletort quitted it at the front entrance and Captain George of the Grey Musketeers left it by the garden door.

Though the Prince's chance of victory must have been doubtful at any time, I do not think he could have chosen a more unfavourable moment to deploy into line, as it were, and offer battle in the open field. His fair enemy had already been skirmishing with one foe, and caught sight of another, whom she would willingly have engaged. Her trumpets had sounded the *alerte*, her colours were displayed, her artillery was in advance, guns unlimbered, matches lighted, front cleared, all her forces ready and quivering for action—woe to the veteran when he should leave his entrenchments, and sally forth to hazard all his past successes on the rash issue of one stand-up fight!

His instincts told him he was wrong, even while he followed the obsequious lackey, in the Montmirail livery, through the glittering suite of rooms that led him to his fate. Followed, with cold hands and shaking knees—he who had led stormers and commanded armies! Even to himself there was a something of ridicule in the position; and he smiled, as a man smiles who is going to the dentist, while he whispered—"Courage, my child! —It is but a quarter of an hour, after all! and yet —I wish I had put that other glass of brandy into my *lait de poule!*"

The Marquise received him more graciously than usual, and this, too, had he known it, was an omen of ill-success. But it is strange how little experience teaches in the campaigns of Cupid, how completely his guerilla style of warfare foils all regular strategy, and established system of tactics. I believe any school-girl in her teens to be a match for the most insidious adversary of the opposite sex, and I think that the older the male serpent, and the oftener he has cast his skin, the more easily does his subtlety succumb to the voice of the innocent and unconscious charmer. What chance then had an honest, conceited, thick-headed old soldier, with nothing of the snake about him, but his glistening outside, and labouring under the further disadvantage of being furiously in earnest, against such a proficient as the Marquise? A coquette of a dozen years' standing, rejoicing in battle, accustomed to triumph, witty, scornful, pitiless, and to-day, for the first time, doubtful of her prowess, and dissatisfied with herself.

She had never looked better in her life; the flushed cheeks, the brilliant eyes, the simple white dress, with its scarlet breast-knots, these combined to constitute a very seductive whole, and one that, had there been a mirror in which she could see it

reflected, might have gone far to strengthen the Abbé's arguments, and to convince her that his schemes, aspiring though they seemed, were founded on a knowledge of human nature, experience, and common sense. Neither, I imagine, does a woman ever believe in her heart that any destiny can be quite beyond her reach. Though fortune may offer man something more than his share of goods and tangible possessions on this material earth, nature has conferred on woman the illimitable inheritance of the possible; and no beggar-maiden is so lowly but that she may dream of King Cophetua, and his crown-matrimonial laid at her shoeless feet.

To see the chance, vague, yet by no means unreasonable, of becoming Queen of France looming in the future—to entertain a preference, vague, yet by no means doubtful, for a handsome captain of Grey Musketeers—and to be made honourable love to at a little past thirty by a man and a Marshal a little past sixty—was not all this enough to impart a yet deeper lustre to the glowing cheeks and the bright eyes, to bid the scarlet breastknots heave and quiver over that warm, wilful, and impassioned heart?

It was not a fair fight; far from it: it was

Goliath against David, and David, moreover, with neither stone nor sling, nor ruddy countenance, nor the mettle of untried courage, nor youthful confidence in his cause.

He came up boldly, however, when he confronted his enemy, and kissed her hand with a ponderous compliment to her good looks which she cut short rudely enough.

Then he took his hat from the floor, and began to smooth its lace against his heavy coat-cuff. She knew it was coming, and though it made her nervous, she rather liked it, notwithstanding.

"Madame!" said the Prince-Marshal, and then he stopped, for his voice sounded so strange he thought he had better begin again.

"Madame, I have for a long period had the honour and advantage of your friendship. Nay, I hope that I have, in all that time, done nothing to forfeit your good opinion?"

She laughed a little unmeaning laugh, and of course avoided a direct answer to the question.

"I always stand up for my friends," said she, "and yourself, Monsieur, amongst the number. It is no light task, I can assure you!"

The veteran had opened fire now, and gained confidence every moment. The first step, the first

plunge, the first sentence. It is all the same. Fairly in deep water, a brave man finds his courage come back even faster than it failed him.

"Madame," he resumed, laying his hat on the floor again, and sitting bolt upright, while his voice, though hoarser than usual, grew very stern, "Madame, I am in earnest. Seriously in earnest at present. Listen. I have something of importance to say to you!"

In spite of herself, she was a little cowed, "One moment, Prince!" she exclaimed, rising to shut the door and window of her boudoir, as if against listeners. It was a simple feminine manœuvre to gain time; but, looking into the garden, she spied a remnant of the stephanotis left where George had trodden it, and when she sat down again she was as brave as a lioness once more. Her change of position rather disordered her suitor's line of battle, and as she had skilfully increased the distance between them, his tactics were still further impeded. In his love affairs the Prince-Marshal's system had always been to come as soon as possible to close quarters; but it was so long since he had made a regular formal proposal of marriage, that he could not for the life of him remember the precise attitude in

which he had advanced. Some vague recollection he entertained, strengthened by what he had seen on the stage, of going down on his knees, but the floor was very slippery, and he was not quite confident about getting up again. It would be ridiculous, he felt, to urge his suit on all-fours, and he knew the Marquise well enough, besides, to be quite sure her paroxysms of laughter in such a difficulty would render her incapable of returning an intelligible answer. Altogether, he decided on sitting still, and though it was obviously a disadvantage, doing his love-making at arms' length.

"Madame!" he repeated for the fourth time, "I am a soldier; I am a man of few words; I am, I hope, a gentleman, but I am no longer young. I do not dissemble this; I am even past my prime. Frankly, Madame, I am getting an old man."

It was incontestable. She smothered a smile as she mentally conceded the position, but in reply she had nothing to say, and she said it.

The Prince-Marshal, expecting the disclaimer that perhaps politeness demanded, seemed here a little bothered. He had no doubt gone through many rehearsals of the imaginary scene, and it confused him to lose his anticipated cue. Seeking inspiration once more, then, from his hat, he

proceeded rather inconsequently. "Therefore it is that I feel emboldened in the present instance to lay before you, Madame, the thoughts, the intentions, the wishes—brief! the anticipations that I had formed of my own future, and to ask your opinion, and, indeed, your advice, or perhaps, I should say, your approval of my plans."

What a quick ear she had! Far off, upstairs, she heard the door of her daughter's bedroom shut, and she knew that Cerise, after stopping at every flower-stand in the gallery, would as usual come straight to her mamma's boudoir. Such a diversion would be invaluable, as it must for the present prevent any decided result from her interview with the Prince-Marshal. She had resolved not to accept him for a husband, we know, and sooner or later, she must come to a definite understanding with her faithful old suitor, but she seemed in this instance strangely given to procrastination, and inclined from time to time to put off the evil day.

Why she did not prefer to have done with it once for all, why she could not wait calmly for his proposal and refuse him with a polite reverence, as she had refused a score of others, it is not for me to explain. Perhaps she would not willingly

abdicate a sovereignty that became year by year more precious and more precarious. Perhaps she loved a captive, as a cat loves a mouse, allowing it so much liberty as shall keep it just within reach of the cruel velvet paw. Perhaps she shrunk from any decided step that would force her own heart to confess it was interested elsewhere. A woman's motives may be countless as the waves on the shore, her intention fathomless as mid-ocean by the deep-sea lead.

Hearing the march of her auxiliaries, she made light of an engagement at closer quarters now. Looking affectionately in the Prince-Marshal's face, she drew her chair a little nearer, and observed in a low voice—

"I am pretty sure to approve of any plan, my Prince, that conduces to your comfort—to your welfare, nay—" for she heard the rustle of her daughter's dress, and the lock of the door move—"to your happiness!"

The tone and accompanying glance were irresistible. Any male creature must have fallen a victim on the spot. The Prince-Marshal, sitting opposite the door, dropped his hat, sprang from his chair a yard at a bound, made a pounce at the white hand of the Marquise, and before he could

grasp it, stopped midway as if turned to stone, his mouth open, his frame rigid, his very moustaches stiffening, and his eyes staring blankly at the figure of Cerise in the doorway, who, although a good deal discomposed, for she thought to find mamma alone, rose, or rather *sank*, to the occasion, and bestowed on him the lowest, the most voluminous, and the longest reverence that was ever practised for months together at their *pension* by the best brought-up young ladies in France. The Prince-Marshal was too good a soldier to neglect such an opportunity for retreat, and retired in good order, flattering himself that though he had suffered severely, it might still be considered a drawn battle with the Marquise.

When he had made his bow with a profusion of compliments to the fresh and beautiful Mademoiselle, whom he wished at a worse place than back in her convent, mother and daughter sat down to spend the morning together.

Contrary to custom, the pair were silent and preoccupied; each, while she tried to seem at ease, immersed in her own thoughts, and yet, though engrossed with the same subject of meditation, it was strange that neither of them mentioned it to the other.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MOTHER OF SATAN.

MALLETORT, leaving his cousin's house by its principal egress, did not enter his coach at once, but whispering certain directions to the servants, proceeded leisurely down a narrow lane or alley, leading, after a variety of windings, into one of the great thoroughfares of Paris. The street was well adapted for such an interview, either of love or business, as it was desirable to keep secret, consisting, on one side, only of the backs of houses in which the windows were built up, and on the other, of the high, dead wall that bounded the extensive premises of the Hôtel Montmirail. Casting a hasty glance before and behind, to make sure he was not watched, the Abbé, when he

reached the narrowest part of the narrow passage—for it was hardly more—halted, smiled, and observed to himself:—"A man's character must be either very spotless or very good-for-nothing if he can thus afford to set the decencies of life at defiance. A churchman with an assignation! and at noon in this quarter of Paris! My friend, it is rather a strong measure, no doubt! And suppose, nevertheless, she should fail to appear? It would be the worse for her, that's all! Ah! the sweet Sultana! There she is!"

While he spoke, a woman wrapped in a large shawl, with another folded round her head, came swiftly down the alley, and stopped within two paces of him. It was the Quadroon, agitated, hurried, a good deal out of breath, and, perhaps, also a little out of temper.

"It's no use, Monsieur l'Abbé!" were the first words she gasped. "I cannot, and I dare not, and I *will* not. Besides, I have no time, I must be back directly. There's Mademoiselle, most likely, wanting me this minute. The idea of such a thing! It's out of the question altogether!"

Malletort laughed good-humouredly. He could afford to be good-humoured, for the woman was in his power.

"And the alternative?" said he. "Not that I want to *drive* you, my Queen of Sheba, but still, a bargain is a bargain. Do you think Mademoiselle would engross your time much longer if the Marquise knew all I know, and, indeed, all that it is my duty to tell her?"

Célandine clasped her hands imploringly, and dropped at once into complete submission.

"I will go with you, Monsieur l'Abbé," said she, humbly; "but you will not forget your promise. If you were to betray me, I should die."

"And I, too," thought Malletort, who knew the nature with which he had to deal, and treated it as a keeper treats the tigress in her cage. "It is no question of betrayal," he said, aloud. "Follow me. When we reach the carriage, step in. My people know where to drive."

He walked on very fast, and she followed him; her black eyes glancing fierce misgivings, like those of a wild animal that suspects a snare.

Two or three more windings, with which he seemed thoroughly familiar; a glance around that showed not a passenger visible, nor indeed a living soul, save a poor old rag-picker raking a heap of refuse with her hook, and the Quadroon suddenly emerged in mid-stream, so to speak, surrounded

by the life and bustle of one of the main streets in Paris. At a few paces distant stood a plain, well-appointed coach, and the Abbé, pointing to its door, which a servant was holding open, Célandine found herself, ere she could look round, rumbling, she knew not where, over the noisy pavement; completely in that man's power, for whom, perhaps, of all men in the world, she entertained the strongest feelings of terror, stronger even than her aversion.

She did not take long, however, to recover herself. The strain of savage blood to which she owed those fierce black eyes and jetty locks gave her also, with considerable physical courage, the insensibility of rude natures to what we may term *moral* fear. She might shudder at a drawn knife if she were herself unarmed, or cower before a whip if her hands were tied and her back bared; but to future evil, to danger neither visible nor tangible she was callous as a child.

They had not travelled half a mile ere she showed her delight in every feature of her expressive face at the rapid motion and the gay scenes through which she was driven. In a few minutes she smiled pleasantly, and asked their destination as gaily as if they had been going to a ball.

Malletort thought it a good opportunity for a few impressive words.

"Célandine," said he, gravely, "every one of us has a treasure somewhere, hidden up in the heart. What is it that you love better than everything else in the world?"

The dark face, tanned by many a year of sun, yet comely still, saddened and softened while he spoke, the black eyes grew deeper and deeper as they seemed to look dreamily into the past. After a pause she drew a sorrowful sigh, and answered, "Mademoiselle!"

"Good," replied the Abbé. "You are bound on an errand now for which Mademoiselle will be grateful to you till her dying day."

She looked curiously in his face. "Cerise is dear to me as my own," said she. "How can I do more for her to-day than yesterday, and to-morrow, and every day of my life?"

He answered by another question.

"Would you like to see your darling a Princess of France?" The Quadroon's eyes glistened and filled with tears.

"I would lay down my life for the child," was all she said in reply.

But he had got her malleable now, and he knew

it. Those tear-drops showed him she was at the exact temperature for fusion. A little less, she would have remained too cold and hard. A little more, and over-excitement would have produced irritation, anger, defiance: then the whole process must have been begun again. It was a good time to secure her confederacy, and let her see a vague shadowy outline of his plans.

In a few short sentences, but glowing and eloquent, because of the tropical nature to which they were addressed, Malletort sketched out the noble destiny he had in view for her mistress, and the consequent elevation of Cerise to the rank of royalty. He impressed on his listener the necessity of implicit, unquestioning obedience to his commands. Above all, of unbroken silence and unvaried caution till their point was gained.

"As in your own beautiful island," said the Abbé, soaring for the occasion to the metaphorical, "if you would pass by night through its luxuriant jungles, you must keep the star that guides you steadily in view, nor lose sight of it for an instant, so in the path I shall indicate, never forget, however distant and impracticable it may seem, the object to which our efforts are directed. In either case, if your attention wanders for a mo-

ment, in that moment your feet stray from the path: you stumble amongst the tangled creepers—you pierce yourself with the cruel cactus—you tread on some venomous reptile that turns and stings you to the bone; nay, you may topple headlong down a precipice into the deep, dark, silent waters of the lagoon. Once there, I tell you fairly, you might wait a long while before the Marquise, or Mademoiselle, or myself would wet a finger to pull you out!"

Thus urging on his listener the importance of her task, now in plain direct terms, now in the figurative language of parables, their drive seemed to have lasted but a few minutes, when it was brought to an abrupt termination by the stoppage of the coach before Signor Bartoletti's residence.

It appeared that the visitors were expected, for a couple of his heavily-decorated footmen waited on the stairs, and Célandine, following the Abbé with wondering eyes and faltering steps, found herself received with as much pomp and ceremony as if she had been a princess of the blood.

They were ushered into the room that communicated with his laboratory. It was empty, but wine and fruit stood on the table. Malletort pressed the Quadroon to taste the former in vain.

Then he passed without ceremony into the adjoining apartment, assuring her of his speedy return.

Left to herself, Célandine drank greedily from the water-jug ere she crossed the floor on tiptoe, stealthy as a wild cat, and pressing her ear to the door, applied all her faculties intently to the one act of listening.

She heard the Abbé's greeting distinctly enough, and the sentence immediately following, spoken laughingly, as usual.

"The parts are cast," said he, "and the stage prepared. It remains but to dress the principal actress and make her perfect in her cue."

"Have you brought her?" answered an eager voice, hurried, agitated, and scarcely above a whisper.

Indistinct as were the syllables, their effect on the Quadroon was like magic. She started, she passed her hand wildly across her face; her very lips turned white, and she trembled in every limb. Her attitude was no longer the simple act of listening. In concentrated eagerness, it resembled the crouch of a leopard before its spring.

The door opened, and she sprang in good earnest. As Bartoletti crossed the threshold, she flew at him, and with one pounce had him fast by the throat.

"Where is he?" she screamed with foaming lips and flashing eyes. "Where is he? What have you done with him? I will kill you if you do not tell me. Man! Beast! Monster! Where have you hid my child?"

It took all the Abbé's strength, combined with the Italian's own efforts, to untwine those nervous fingers. At last he shook himself free, to stand gasping, panting, wiping his face, exhausted, terror-stricken, and unmanned.

When her physical powers yielded, her nervous system gave way as well; sinking into a chair, she sobbed and wept hysterically, rocking herself to and fro, murmuring—

"My baby! My fair-faced baby! My own! My only child!"

Bartoletti had by this time found his voice, though still husky and unstrung.

"Célandine!" he exclaimed, and the tone denoted fear, anxiety, surprise, even disgust, yet a something of tenderness and interest ran through it all.

Malletort lifted his eyebrows, shrugged his shoulders, and had recourse to his snuffbox. A few words had settled his business with the Adept, and his fine perceptions told him that in a scene

like the present, however it originated, the interference of a third person would do more harm than good. Had he permitted himself such weaknesses, he felt he could have been astonished; but the Abbé had long established as an axiom, that "he might be disgusted, but could never be surprised." He had skill to distinguish, moreover, the nice point at which a delicate piece of workmanship may be quite spoiled by one additional touch, and knew the exact moment when it is advisable to leave both well and ill alone; so he pocketed his snuffbox, and made a bow to the agitated pair.

"An unexpected recognition," said he, politely, "and agitating, I perceive, to both. My introduction is then unnecessary. Pardon! You will permit me to wish you good-day, and leave you to arrange matters between yourselves!"

Insensibly Bartoletti opened the door for his guest; insensibly he returned the parting salutation; and insensibly, like a sleep-walker, he sat down opposite and gazed blankly in the Quadroon's face.

She at least was awake, and on the alert. The storm of her emotion had subsided. She summoned all her energies for the object she had in view.

"Stefano!" she said, in a kindly, conciliating tone, "forgive my violence. You and I have been friends for years. You know my quick temper of old. I can trust you. You can never be indifferent to my welfare."

He was sufficiently reassured by this time to fill a large goblet of wine, which he half emptied at a gulp. His cheek regained its swarthy bloom, and his little black eye glistened fondly while he answered—

"Never indifferent, Célandine! Never false! Never changed in all these years!"

She was, as we know, one-fourth a negress, and past middle-age. Of an exterior so wild and weird, that the courtiers called her, as we also know, "The Mother of Satan." He was turned fifty, self-indulgent, dishonest, with oily skin and beady eyes; short, swarthy, thick-set, and altogether not unlike a mole! Yet was there a spark of true love for his visitor, lurking somewhere not entirely smothered amongst all the mass of impurities with which the man's heart was filled.

She was too much a woman to be quite unconscious of her power. She spoke in soft and coaxing accents now, while she replied—

"I know it, Stefano. I believe it. I have also a good memory, and am not likely to forget. And, Stefano, you have a kind heart—you will not keep me longer in suspense about the child. He is here? In this house? In the next róom? Oh! let me see him! Let me only see him, and I will do anything you ask!"

She had slid from her chair, and knelt before him, holding the Adept's scarred, burned fingers to her lips.

His face betrayed the pain he suffered in inflicting pain on her. "What can I tell you?" he answered. "It is cruel to deceive you. It is cruel to speak the truth. I have never seen the boy since he left me. Do you think I would have kept him from you? How can I find him? How can I bring him back? You talk as if I was king of France!"

A horrible fear came across her. She rose to her feet, and shook both fists in his face.

"Man!" she exclaimed, "do not tell me he is dead! You shall answer for it, if heaven or hell have any power on earth!"

There were tears in his little beady eyes, unaccustomed tears, that vouched for his truth, even to *her*, while he replied—

"You are unjust, Célandine; and you would

see your injustice if you did but think for a moment. What had I to gain by taking care of the boy? What had I to gain by ridding myself of him? Had I been to blame, do you suppose I should have sent you the earliest information of his flight? Have I not felt your sorrows keenly as if they were my own? Do I not feel for you now? Listen: I am the same Stefano Bartoletti who told you the secret of his life, the desire of his heart, by the side of that sweet serene lagoon, in the beautiful island which probably neither of us may ever see again. I have learned many strange lessons—I have witnessed many strange scenes since then. Many years have passed over my head, and wisdom has not despised me as the least apt among her pupils. Statesmen, nobles, princes themselves have been glad to visit me in person, and reap the fruit of my studies and my experience. But I tell you, Célandine!"—and here the little man smote his breast, and for the moment looked every inch a champion—"I am the same Stefano Bartoletti. I swear to you that if you will but join me heart and hand in this, the last and greatest of my schemes, I will never rest till I have found the boy, and brought him back into his mother's arms!"

She gave a wild, fierce cry of joy, and was hugging the brown hand to her bosom once more.

"Money," observed the Signor, walking thoughtfully up and down the room as soon as she had sufficiently composed herself to listen—"Money, you perceive, is the one thing we require. Money alone can overcome this, like all other difficulties on earth. Money in sufficient quantity would make me independent, contented, perhaps happy"—here he stole a tender look in the Quadroon's face—"Money would enable me to quit these cold, dull regions; this constrained, confined, unnatural life. Money would restore *me* my liberty, and *you*, your child. Célandine, will you help me to get it?"

He had touched the right chord. There was eager hope and wild unscrupulous energy in her face while she answered—

"I will! I swear it! Heart and hand I go in with you for this object, and neither fire nor water, nor steel nor poison shall turn me now. You know me, Stefano. I will shrink from nothing. But it is—it is not a question of blood?"

"No, no!" he replied, laughing. "You, too, are unchanged, Célandine. Always in extremes. Make yourself easy on that score. It is but a trick of your former trade. None but yourself can

do it half so well. I will explain it all in five minutes when I have finished this cup of wine. But, Célandine," and here her old admirer drew closer and whispered in her ear.

"I cannot tell," she laughed. "It is impossible to give an answer yet."

"And the price?" continued he, earnestly. "Surely it must have fallen now, though the Marquise is hard to deal with on such matters."

The Quadroon shook her head archly, indeed, coquettishly for her years, and replied—

"Certainly not less than a couple of thousand francs?"

"But suppose she knew everything!" urged the lover.

"Then I think she would be so angry, she would have me flogged, and give me away for nothing!"

He shook his head, pondering deeply. The flogging was indeed a serious consideration. But then, what a reduction it would make in the price!

There was grave matter, he thought, for reflection in the whole business, and his manner was more sedate than usual, while he instructed Célandine in a certain part that the Abbé and he had agreed she should perform.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DÉBONNAIRE.

"IT is good to be superior to mortal weaknesses," said Malletort to himself as he re-entered his coach and drove from Bartoletti's door. "In the human subject I cannot but observe how few emotions are conducive to happiness. That which touches the heart seems always prejudicial to the stomach. How ridiculous, how derogatory, and how uncomfortable to turn red and pale, to burst into tears, to spring at people's throats, nay, even to feel the pulse beat, the head swim, the voice fail at a word, a look, a presence! What, then, constitutes the true well-being of man, the *summum bonum*, the vantage point, the grand *desideratum* to which all philosophy is directed? Self-command!

But self-command leads to the command of others —to success, to victory, to power! and power, with none to share it, none to benefit by it, is it worth the labour of attainment? Can it be that its eminence is but like the crest of a mountain, from which the more extended the horizon the flatter and the more monotonous appears the view. It may, but what matter? Let me only get to the summit, and I can always come down again at my leisure. *Basta!* here we are. Now to gain a foothold on the slippery path that leads to the very top."

The Abbé's carriage was brought to a halt while he spoke, by a post of Grey Musketeers stationed in front of the Palais Royal. The Churchman's plain and quiet equipage had no right of entrance, and he alighted to pass through the narrow ingress left unguarded for foot-passengers. Hence he crossed a paved court, turned short into a wing of the building with which he seemed well acquainted, and stopped at the foot of a narrow staircase, guarded by one solitary sentry of the corps.

It was our acquaintance, Bras-de-Fer, beguiling the tedium of his watch by a mental review of his own adventures in love and war.

The Abbé knew everybody, and the grim

Musketeer saluted his holy friend cordially enough, excusing himself, while he balanced his heavy weapon across his breast, that his orders forbade him to allow any one to pass.

"Lay down your arms, my son," said the Churchman, good-humouredly. "How your wrists must ache by supper-time! I have but three words to say to your captain, and if you will bend your tall head lower by a few inches I can give you the countersign."

With that he whispered it in his ear, and Bras-de-Fer, again excusing himself, bade him pass on, regaining an attitude of extreme stiffness and martial severity, as if to make amends for past civility somewhat at variance with established discipline.

A green baize door at the head of the staircase swung open to the Abbé's push, admitting him to an anteroom, of which Captain George was the only occupant. He, too, seemed weary of his watch, which was tedious from its dull unvarying routine—void of excitement, yet entailing grave and oppressive responsibilities. His greeting to Malletort, however, was more cordial, so thought that keen observer, than is afforded by a man who merely wearies of his own society; and the Abbé

was right in his general impression, only wrong in detail.

Captain George was indeed favourably affected to everybody connected, however distantly, with the house of Montmirail. So far the Abbé judged correctly enough, but he missed the true cause by a hair's-breadth, and attributed to the magic of black eyes an effect exclusively owing to blue.

There was little leisure, however, for exchange of compliments, and the Musketeer's solitude was to be relieved but for a few precious moments at a time.

"His Highness has already twice asked for you," said he, in the tone of an injured man. "You had better go in at once." So Malletort, leaving the ill-used warrior to his own companionship, passed on to an inner apartment, taking with him a stool in his hand, as was the custom, in case the interview should be protracted, and the Regent require him to sit down.

The room he entered was small, gloomy, panelled with a dark-coloured wood, octagonal in shape, relieved by very little furniture, and having another door opposite that which admitted the visitor concealed by heavy velvet curtains. At the solitary table, and on the single chair the

apartment contained, a man was seated, writing busily with his back to the Abbé. A general air of litter pervaded the place, and although the table was heaped with papers, several more were scattered in disorder over the floor.

The writer continued his occupation for several minutes, as if unconscious of the Abbé's presence. Suddenly he gave a sigh of relief, pushed his chair back from the table, and looked up joyously, like a schoolboy interrupted in his task.

"You are welcome, monsieur, you are welcome," said he, rising and pacing to and fro with short, quick steps, while Malletort performed a series of courtly and elaborate bows. "I am about wearied of figures, and I have been saying to myself with every passing step for the last half-hour, Ah! here comes my little Abbé, who confines himself exclusively to facts—my material and deep-thinking Churchman, the best judge in Christendom of wine, pictures, carriages, cutlets, ankles, eyelashes, probabilities, dress, devilry, and deeds of darkness. Here are calculations of Las, to show us all how we need only be able to write our names, and so acquire boundless wealth; but the miserable Scotchman knows no more than the dead how to spend his millions. Would you believe it, my

dear fellow? Vaudeville dined with him last night, and they served olives with the stewed ortolans! Olives, I tell you, with ortolans! The man must be a hog!" And the Regent wrinkled up his forehead, while he spoke in a favourite grimace, that he flattered himself resembled the portraits of Henri Quartre.

He bore, indeed, a kind of spurious resemblance to that great king and gallant soldier, but the resemblance of the brach to the deer-hound, the palfrey to the war-horse, the hawk to the eagle. He made the most of it, however, such as it was; brushed his dark hair into a cluster on the top of his head, contracted the point of his nose, elongated his chin, and elevated his eyebrows till he almost fancied himself the first Bourbon who sat on the throne of France. Nay, he even went so far as to wear his stockings and the knees of his breeches extremely tight, while the latter were gathered and puckered loosely about the waist, to approach as nearly as possible the costume in which the hero was usually portrayed.

In all the worse points of his paragon's character, he copied him to the life, only exaggerating to habitual vice the love of pleasure that was Henry's principal weakness. As the duke's face was

broad, high-coloured, good-humoured, nay, notwithstanding the marks it bore of his excesses, tolerably well-favoured, while his figure, though scarcely tall enough for dignity, was robust and in fair proportion, the imitation seemed, perhaps, not entirely unfaithful to its original. Both possessed in a high degree the charm of an exquisite manner; but while the King of Navarre combined with a monarch's condescension the frank and simple bearing of a soldier, the Duke of Orleans was especially distinguished for the suavity and external ease that mark the address of an accomplished gentleman.

This prince possessed, no doubt, the germ of many good qualities; but how could the most promising seed bear fruit when it was choked up and overgrown by such rank weeds as gluttony, drunkenness, and sensuality? vices which seem to sap the energy of the mind as surely, if not so rapidly, as they destroy the vigour of the body.

Yet the Regent was gifted with a certain persuasive eloquence, a certain facility of speech and gesture, invaluable to those who have the conduct of public affairs. He possessed a faithful memory, ready wit, imperturbable good-humour, and quickness of perception in seizing the salient points of a

subject, which made him appear, at least, a capable politician, if not a deep and far-seeing statesman. Neither was he wanting in that firmness which was so much required by the state of parties at the time when he assumed the Regency, and this was the more remarkable, that his nervous system could not but have been much deteriorated and deranged by the frequency and extravagance of his debauches. Meantime, we have left the Abbé bowing and the Duke grimacing at the bare idea of brown game and olives in the same stewpan, a subject that occupied his attention for several minutes. Rousing himself after a while, he began, as usual, to detail the proceedings of the morning's council to Malletort, who had grown by degrees from a mere comrade of his pleasures, into the confidential and principal adviser of his schemes. It promised to be a long report, and he motioned the Abbé, who had fortunately prepared himself with a stool, to sit down. There were many complaints to make—many knots to unfasten—many interests to reconcile, but the Abbé listened patiently, and suggested remedies for each in turn.

The parliament had been refractory. Nothing could bring them to subjection but a Bed of

Justice, or full assemblage of peers, and representatives, in presence of the young king.

The Keeper of the Seals was unreasonable. He must be forced into collision with the parliament, whom he had always held in antagonism, and they might be left to punish each other.

The Duc du Maine and Marshal de Villeroy, constant thorns in the Regent's side, had applied for more powers, more pomp, and, worse still, more money, on the score of the young king. His Majesty must be set against his governors, and it could best be done by making a festival for him to which these would not trust his person, and from which an enforced restriction would cause the royal pupil to feel himself shamefully aggrieved. In short, conflicting interests were to be reconciled, if their disunion seemed to threaten the Government; political parties to be dissolved by a judicious apple of discord thrown in their midst at the Abbé's instigation, and a general balance of power to be established, in which the Regent could always preponderate by lending his own weight to the scale. Altogether a dozen difficulties of state-craft were disposed of in as many minutes, and the Duke, rising from the table, pressed his hand familiarly on the confidant's

shoulder, to keep him in his seat, and exclaimed, gaily—

"They may well call me the 'Débonnaire,' little Abbé, Hein! There have been but two Bourbons yet who ever *understood* France. One was a King, and the other—well, the other is only a Regent. No matter. Cric! Crac! Two snaps of the fingers and everything fits into its place like a game at dominoes. But, little Abbé," added the exulting politician, while his brow clouded and he forgot to look like Henri Quatre. "to govern the nation signifies but ruling *men*. Such matters arrange themselves. The state machine can go without a push. But I have worse complications than these. Council me, my dear Abbé. There is discord dire this morning throughout the women. I tell you the whole heap are at daggers drawn with one another, and my life is hardly safe amongst them all."

Malletort smiled and shook his head. The difficulty was natural enough, but the remedy required consideration. So he opened his snuffbox.

"There is a tribe of Arabs," he replied, "Highness, far up in the Desert, of whom I have heard, that their religion permits each man to marry two wives, but with the stipulation, at first sight

reasonable enough, that he should live with them both in one tent. The practice of bigamy, I understand, has in that tribe so fallen into disuse as to be completely unknown."

The Regent laughed loudly. "I believe it," said he, "I believe it implicitly. Powers of strife! and parts of speech! A man should be blind and deaf also to endure the Parabére and the Sabran in neighbouring *faubourgs*, not to speak of the same tent! Ah! these Orientals understand domestic government thoroughly. The hareem is a place for repose, and a noisy woman soon quits it, I believe, by the river-gate. We too have the Seine, but alas! where is the sack? I tell you, Malletort, I am tired of them both. I am tired of them all. Madame la Duchesse may be cold, pompous, stiff, contradictory, and, oh! as wearisome as a funeral! but at least she remains half the day in her own apartments, and can command herself sufficiently to behave with decency when she leaves them."

"Madame la Duchesse," replied the Abbé, bowing reverentially, "is an exemplary and adorable princess. She has but one fault, perhaps I should say less her fault than her misfortune: she is your Highness's wife."

The Débonnaire laughed again, loud and long. "Well said, little Abbé!" he exclaimed; "*My* fault, *her* misfortune. Nevertheless, the crime is unpardonable—so no more of *her*. How shall I reconcile Madame de Sabran and Madame de Parabére? I tell you, they sup with us this very night. You make one, Abbé, of course!" Malletort bowed lower than ever. "But think of these two at enmity across my narrow table! Why the Centaurs and Lapithæ would be a love-feast compared to it. Like my ancestor of Navarre, Monsieur l'Abbé, I fear neither man nor devil, but there are some women, I honestly confess, whose anger I dare not encounter, and that is the truth!"

"I know nothing of women and their ways," answered Malletort, humbly. "It is a science my profession and my inclinations forbid me alike to understand; but I imagine that in gallantry as in chemistry, counteracting influences are most effectual when of a cognate nature to the evil. *Similia similibus curantur*, and your Highness can have no difficulty, surely, in applying a thousand smiling, soft-spoken antidotes to two scolding, scowling women."

The Regent shook his head gravely. It was a subject of which he had diligently studied both

theory and practice, yet found he knew little more about it than when he began.

"They are all so different," he complained, peevishly, "and yet all so alike in their utter insensibility to reason; their perverted wilfulness in looking on impossibilities as accomplished facts. There is Madame de Sabran wants me to make her a duchess of France! "How can I make you a duchess of France, madame?" said I. "Would you have your 'mastiff,' as you call him, created a duke for *your* services? 'He would make a better than so and so, and so and so!' she answered as coolly as possible, naming half a dozen, who, it must be confessed, are not one bit more respectable! That is another thing about the woman: she always contrives to have a distorted shadow of reason, like a stick in the water, on her side. It was only the other day I made him one of my chamberlains, and now she declares he ought to be given a step of rank to uphold the dignity of the office. How can you reason with such a woman as that?"

"Waste of time, Highness!" answered Malletort, composedly. "They are born not to be instructed, but admired!"

"I used to admire her more than I do now,"

observed the Regent, thoughtfully. "Still the woman is amusing and witty; there is no denying it. Besides, she speaks her mind freely, and however violent the passions she puts herself in, they are over in five minutes. But what am I to do with the other? I give you the honour of a Bourbon, my friend, she has not uttered a syllable beyond 'Yes, monsieur,' 'No, monsieur,' since yesterday afternoon, when she dropped at once from the height of good-humour into a fit of impenetrable sulks."

"Without the slightest cause, of course!" observed the Abbé.

"Without the slightest cause," repeated the Prince, "at least that I could discover. There was indeed a slight difficulty about some flowers. I had promised her a bouquet of stephanotis for the masked ball to-night. It is rare—its smell is to me overpowering, but it is her favourite perfume. Well, my people scoured the country for half a dozen leagues round Paris and none was to be procured. With you or me, Abbé, the conclusion would seem natural enough, that if the stephanotis has not yet bloomed, the stephanotis cannot yet be in flower. But to a woman! Bah! Such an argument is no reason at all! It is quite possible

she may even refuse to accompany me to the ball to-night!"

Malletort did not think so, and his hopes, just now so buoyant, lost nothing by a suggestion which only betrayed his patron's ignorance of the female mind.

"Ah, Highness!" he exclaimed, throwing a gleam of sympathy into his eyes, which contrasted much with their usual expression, "how completely is your condescension misjudged! How utterly your kind heart thrown away! You say truly, women are so different. These think of their own aggrandisement, even while they bask in your affection. Others here at Court would throw themselves body and soul at your feet were you to-morrow changed into a simple page from Duke of Orleans and Master of France!"

"How," exclaimed the Regent, unable to conceal that his vanity was gratified. "Do you speak from your own knowledge? Are you laughing at me? How can you possibly have found this out?"

"It is indeed a matter quite beyond my province," answered the Abbé; "but circumstances have thrown me so frequently into the society of one of the ladies in question that I must indeed have been blind not to perceive the truth. Excuse

me, Highness, I had rather not pursue the subject any farther."

But the Regent was not so to be put off. With all his shrewdness, he had considerable personal vanity, and but for his debaucheries, might perhaps have shown some sensibility of heart. In his mind he ran over the leading beauties of the Court, and as he had been little scrupulous in paying them attention, one and all, the riddle was perhaps the less difficult to solve. His eye sparkled, and he clapped his hands like a schoolboy while he shouted out—

"I have it! I have it! Little Abbé, you have let the cat out of the bag. Now I know why the proudest names in France have been offered her in vain. Now I understand her defiance, her coldness, her unapproachable dignity. Do you know, my friend, what you tell me is a veritable romance, and, in return, I assure you I have never been insensible to the charms of Madame de Montmirail!"

"You are speaking of my kinswoman, Monsieur le Duc," replied the Abbé, haughtily, "and a member of the proudest house in the kingdom. Your Highness will be good enough to reflect that I mentioned no names, and I have been too faith-

ful a servant, I think, to deserve a gratuitous insult."

"Pardon, my dear Abbé!" exclaimed the Regent, with an affectation of deep concern, though accepting Malletort's protest, no doubt, at its real value. "None can respect the house of Montmirail more than I do. None can value the friendship of Abbé Malletort so much; but these women and their whims turn my poor head. What did you advise about the Parabére? I forget."

"Dismiss her!" answered the Churchman, shortly. "It will be one embarrassment the less in your Highness's career."

"But she is so beautiful," whimpered the Regent. "There is not such another complexion in France. If I were to leave her, do you not think half my nobility would be mad to pay their court to her? She is so white, you see—so exceedingly white and soft. Such a skin, my dear Abbé. Such a skin!"

"Skin her, then," replied Malletort, "and make a covering of her integument for your arm-chair! It is the best advice I can offer your Highness, and what I should do myself in your case."

Then they both laughed at the brutal jest. The one because he was in high good-humour with the prospect of his hinted conquest; the other be-

cause he had not forgotten the bouquet of which a few inhalations could turn the whole face black, and because, reflecting on the rapid progress of his schemes, he thought it only fair that those should laugh who win.

But in order thoroughly to act his part out, he returned to business before he took his leave. "Those *lettres de cachet!*" he exclaimed, as if he had just recollected them. "Did your Highness express your views on the subject to your council?"

"I did indeed," answered the Regent, significantly; "and the good old custom is revived by an edict. But though he who seeks finds, I think he is more sure to find who *hides*, and I will take care no man in France shall use them but myself."

Then Malletort bowed himself out, well satisfied, and found Captain George in the anteroom, putting on his belts to receive the Black Musketeers, whose band could be heard playing, and their arms clashing as they marched into the court to relieve guard.

CHAPTER XV.

THE MASKED BALL.

THAT night much noise and confusion reigned outside the Grand Opera House. Torches flared, linkmen shouted, horses plunged, backed, and clattered: oaths flew here and there—whips were plied—carriage-wheels grated—coachmen swore, and, at short intervals, tall figures of the Black Musketeers were called in to keep order, a duty they fulfilled in a summary manner, with little forbearance to the public, dealing kicks, cuffs, and such remonstrances freely around, and clearing a space, wherever space was required, by dropping the butts of their heavy weapons on the feet of the recoiling crowd. With such powerful assistance, coach after coach deposited its load at the grand

entrance, around which were congregated valets and lackeys, wearing the liveries of the noblest families in France.

Beautiful and gorgeous were the dresses thus emerging for an instant under the red glare of torchlight to disappear through the folding-doors within. Shimmering in satin, and sparkling with jewels, the loveliest women of the capital passed in review for three paces before the populace, little loth, perhaps, to submit their toilets to the scientific criticism of a Parisian crowd, a criticism that reached, however, no higher than the chin, for every one of those fair French faces was hidden in a black mask. Their gallants, on the contrary, came unprovided with these defences, and the male bird, indeed, though without question the uglier animal, was on the present occasion equal in brilliancy of plumage to his mate.

It is, however, with the interior that we have to do, behind the folding-doors that swallowed up these radiant visions in succession so greedily. That interior was flooded in a warm yellow light. A hundred glittering lustres shone and twinkled at narrow intervals, to stud the curves of white and gold and crimson that belted the ample circle of the building, while high in the centre of its dome

an enormous chandelier flashed and gleamed and dazzled, like some gigantic diamond shivered into a thousand prismatic fragments. From roof to flooring fresh bright colours bloomed in the boxes, as bloom the posies on a flower-stall; while pit, stage, and orchestra, boarded to a level, had become a shifting sea of brilliant hues, whirling, coiling, undulating, ebbing, flowing, surging into a foam of light and snowy plumes, bearing in turn each colour of the rainbow to its surface—flashing and glistening through all its waters with a blaze of gems and gold.

Captain George was wading about in it, more preoccupied and less inclined to take advantage of its gaieties than a Musketeer usually found himself in such a scene of revelry. His distinguished air and manly bearing drew on him, indeed, gibes and taunts, half-raillery, half-compliment, from many a rosy mouth smiling under its black mask, but to these he answered not a word.

He was unlike himself to-night—dull, abstracted, and out of spirits. Even Bras-de-Fer, he felt, would have composed and propounded his heaviest retorts in less time than it took his captain to understand any one of the jests levelled at a taciturnity so out of place. He was in no

mood for banter, nor intrigue, nor amusement—not even for supper. He wanted to see Cerise; he confessed it to himself without reserve, yet he neither expected nor wished to find her in such a scene as this.

An attachment between two young persons, if of a nature to arrive at maturity, seems to gain growth and vigour in an inverse proportion to the amount of care bestowed on its cultivation. The plant is by no means an exotic, scarce even a garden-flower. Nay, I think a chance seedling of this tribe comes to fuller perfection than either graft or cutting. It is good for it also to be crushed, mangled, mown over, or trodden down. Storms and snows and bitter frosts bring it rapidly into flower, and it is astonishing, though a tropical blaze could not satisfy its wants, how little sunshine is required to keep it alive.

Captain George's meetings with Cerise were indeed as numerous as five or six in the week; but they took place at an interval of twenty feet, and consisted of low bows and eager glances from a gentleman on a gravel walk, returned by the formal reverence and deep blush of a young lady in a window-seat. On the principle that half a loaf is better than no bread, I presume

crumbs are acceptable when crusts are not to be obtained. So the Musketeer had felt ill at ease all day, and was now in the most unsuitable frame of mind possible for a masquerade, because the girl had been absent from her window when he passed, which was indeed his own fault, since, in his impatience, he had crossed the gardens of the Hôtel Montmirail a quarter of an hour before his usual time, and had thus perhaps inflicted as much disappointment as he sustained.

Now people in the irritable frame of mind caused by a little anxiety, a little disappointment, and a good deal of uncertainty, seldom betake themselves to solitude, which is indeed rather the resort of real happiness or the refuge of utter despair. The simply discontented are more prone to rush into a crowd, and Captain George had no idea of abstaining from the Great Masked Ball at the Opera House, but rather made his appearance somewhat earlier than his wont at this festivity, though when there, he roamed about in a desultory and dissatisfied manner, first dreading, then faintly hoping, and lastly, ardently desiring to meet Mademoiselle de Montmirail amongst that brilliant, shifting, bantering, and mysterious throng. Disguised, indeed! He would know her,

he felt sure, by her pretty feet alone, if she were masked down to her very ankles.

He was not so well versed in feminine arts but that he had yet to learn how a lady who really wished to remain unknown at these gatherings would alter her voice, her gestures, her figure, her gait—nay, the very shape of her hands and feet to deceive those on whom she wished to practise.

The majority, on the contrary, were most unwilling thus to sink their identity, and only wore masks, I imagine, to hide the absence of blushes at such direct compliments as were sure to be addressed to them, also as an excuse for considerable freedom of speech in return.

The orchestra was pealing out a magnificent "Minuet de la Cour," and that stately measure performed by a few couples of the handsomest gallants and ladies of the Court was eliciting the applause of a large and critical circle, amongst whom Captain George made one, when a voice thrilled in his ear, the tone of which brought the blood to his cheek, while a masked figure beside him passed her hand lightly through his arm. A tremendous flourish of brass instruments rendered the moment well-chosen for secret com-

munication; but the Mask had apparently nothing more confidential to say than this—

"*Qui cherche trouve!* You seek something, fair Musketeer. If you are in earnest, you shall find what you require!"

The voice reminded him almost painfully of Cerise, yet was it deeper and fuller than the girl's in tone. He scanned the figure at his side with a quick, penetrating glance; but she was so shrouded in a black satin cloak reaching to the flounces of her ball-dress, that he gathered but little from her inspection. He noted, however, a leaf of the stephanotis, peeping from under the folds that concealed her bouquet, and recollecting the events of the morning, made a shrewd guess at his companion.

Perhaps she would have thought him very stupid had it been otherwise. All this elaborate artifice of disguise may have been for her own deception, not his. She might talk to him more freely under protest, as it were, that he had no right to know her; and she was, moreover, so well enveloped and altered, that she could scarcely be identified by passing acquaintances, or, indeed, by any one with whom she refused to converse.

"I seek only amusement," answered the Musketeer, with the natural instinct of mankind to disavow sentiment. "I have not yet found much, I confess, though Point-d'Appui's airs and graces in the dance there would afford it to any one who had not seen them as often as I have."

She laughed scornfully, leaning on his arm. "And they call that thing *a Man!*" said she with an accent on the substantive extremely uncomplimentary to Count Point d'Appui, who was indeed a handsome, conceited, pleasant, young good-for-nothing enough; "and these are the objects women break their hearts about—dress for them, dance for them, die for them; nay even come to masked balls, disfigured and disguised for their unworthy sakes. What fools you must think us, Captain George; and what fools we are!"

"You know me, madame," exclaimed the Musketeer, affecting surprise, rather as entering into the spirit of the scene than with any deeper motive. "You must know, then, that I am amongst the most devoted and respectful admirers of your sex."

She laughed again the low soft laugh that was one of her greatest charms, and lost, moreover, none of its attraction from her disguise.

"Know you!" she repeated, still leaning on his

arm perhaps a little heavier than before; "what lady in Paris does not know you as the citadel to resist all her efforts of attack?—as the Orson, the woman-hater, the man of marble, who has no vanity, no feelings, no heart?—the only creature left in this uninteresting town worth conquering? And all those who have tried it, no small number, vow that victory is impossible."

"It shows how little they comprehend me," he replied in a tone of jest, and still pretending not to recognise his companion, who held her head down and took refuge studiously beneath her mask. "If you, madame, would condescend to become better acquainted with me, you would soon learn the falsehood of these ladies' reports to my discredit!"

"Discredit!" she echoed, and to his surprise, nay, to his dismay, a tear fell on the gloved hand within his arm. What could he do but dry it with a kiss? "Discredit!" she said again, in a tone of increasing emotion. "How little you must understand us if you can make use of such a term! Who would care to possess that which half the town has worn and thrown away? What is the value of a heart that has been cut into little scraps and shreds, and left in portions at different friends' houses like gifts on New-year's-day. No, mon-

sieur. If I must give all I am worth for a diamond, let it be such a diamond as the Regent's—large, clear, and entire—not a collection of fragments only held together by their golden setting, like a necklace of Madame de Sabran or Madame de Parabére."

Captain George did not quite follow out the metaphor, his attention being at this moment somewhat distracted by a figure that reminded him of Cerise, yet that he felt was as unlike Cerise as possible. The Musketeer was also a very moderate proficient in the lighter accomplishments of gallantry, being of a self-contained though energetic nature, that was disposed to do its work thoroughly or not at all. He was one of those men, of whom there are more in the world than ladies suppose, whose respect for the sex restrains them from taking that initiative which they forget the latter are especially privileged to decline. Unless therefore a woman throws herself at their heads, they make no advances at all, and then these wretches are just the sort of characters with which such a course, repugnant to their instinctive sense of fitness, is least likely to succeed, after all. They are consequently very difficult birds to tame, and either escape altogether, or are lured into the cage, accidentally as it were, by a pretty face, a shy man-

ner, and some rare combination of circumstances which nobody on earth could have foreseen. When a lady has fairly started, however, and got warmed to her subject, I imagine little is to be gained by interrupting her, and that no efforts of eloquence find so much favour as the forbearance of a good listener. The Marquise thought she had turned her last phrase very prettily, and applied the image of the necklace with considerable art, so she continued, without waiting for an answer, "You do not know me, Captain George, though I know *you*. Also, I mention no names, therefore I break no confidences. Do you remember the day the late king was taken ill, and brought home, never to recover?"

His English blood stirred at the recollection of that gallant stag-hunt, and his eye brightened. She observed it, and not sharing the insular passion for an *innocent* pursuit, drew her conclusions accordingly.

"I have not forgotten it," he replied calmly, "nor the beautiful Marquise and her barb!"

She trembled with pleasure, but commanded her voice, and repeated indifferently, "Ah! the beautiful Marquise! I fancy she nearly rode the poor barb to death that day. What will a woman not do

when her heart is interested? Well, monsieur, have you ever spoken since to the *beautiful* Marquise, as you call her, doubtless in ridicule?"

He began to think he *had* been somewhat remiss, and that to prosecute his intimacy with the mother would have been the easiest way of obtaining access to the daughter. He was not given to self-examination, and did not perceive that his very love for Cerise had prevented his yet entering the house. "Do you know the Marquise de Montmirail?" was all he could find at the moment to say.

"A little!" answered the mask, nodding her head. "But I have an intimate friend who is very intimate with her indeed. You think women cannot be friends, monsieur; you think they have no hearts; you little know the lady of whom we speak. You see her as the world does, and you judge her accordingly. How blind men are! If your eyes are not dazzled by self-conceit, they are bandaged by an impenetrable and cold egotism. A thing must touch your very noses, close like that," and she thrust her pretty hand up within an inch of his face, "or you will not believe in its existence. Nevertheless, I could sometimes find it in my heart to envy you your callousness, your stupidity, your

indifference, and to wish that I had been born a man."

I think at the moment he almost wished it too, for although the voice was very fascinating, and the situation not without its charm, she encumbered him sadly in his search for the young lady, whom yet he did not the least expect to find.

The Marquise, however, was quite satisfied with her position, and disposed to improve the occasion.

"A woman can have no *friends*," she proceeded, speaking in a low tone that the music rendered inaudible to all but her companion. "How I wish she could! I know the sort of one I should choose—brave, steadfast, constant, self-controlled; a gallant soldier, a loyal gentleman; above all, a man uninfluenced by every eye that flashes, every lip that smiles. And yet—and yet," she added, while her soft voice sank to a whisper as the music rose and swelled, "such an one would soon cease to be a friend. Because—because—"

"Because why?" he asked, bending tenderly over her, for it was not in man's nature to remain uninfluenced by such words so spoken.

The dark eyes flashed through their mask, and the hand that rested on his arm clenched tight while she replied—

"Because, I should love him foolishly, madly, if he cared for me; and if not, I should hate him so fiercely that—"

"You come with me from here!" said a loud, good-humoured voice at this interesting juncture, while a man's hand was laid familiarly on the Musketeer's shoulder. "In a quarter of an hour my coach will be waiting at the stage entrance. Not one of my *roués dare* face it! I want a fellow like you, who fears neither man nor devil!"

Captain George bowed low, while the mask, still leaning on his arm, curtsied to the ground.

"Highness," said he, "I shall have the honour! It is a mere duty to serve under his orders, but it becomes *a pleasure* when Monsieur le Duc commands in person."

"And to supper afterwards, of course," added very graciously a lady who was hanging on the Regent's arm, and who carried her mask in her hand. "Captain George is always welcome, as he knows, and we shall not be more than half a dozen at the outside."

Again the Musketeer bowed low, and the Marquise, scanning the last speaker intently, could not but acknowledge that to-night Madame de Parabére looked more than usually beautiful.

The brunette, too, probably overrated the charms of the blonde, the exceeding delicacy of complexion, the softness of skin, and the innocent baby-face, which so fascinated the Regent. Also she thought she detected on that baby-face a decided preference for the Musketeer, and Madame de Montmirail was not a woman to entertain the strongest passions of her sex and leave out jealousy.

Had it not been for these suspicions, the bouquet of stephanotis might have remained all night innocuous beneath her cloak, to be consumed in the stove that warmed her chocolate when she got home. But the Marquise allowed no one to cross her designs with impunity, and watching her new enemy narrowly, began to handle her weapons and prepare for action.

The Regent had been traversing the throng of revellers, with Madame de Parabére on his arm; the latter, proud of her disgrace, and exulting in her infamous position as his acknowledged mistress, had bared her face, in order to receive the full tribute of admiration which her beauty really deserved. Now, while the Duke stood still for a moment, and exchanged a few jesting compliments and well-bred sarcasms with the passing

maskers, an encounter in which he acquitted himself with considerable tact and ingenuity, his companion, dearly loving mischief, turned all her batteries on Captain George.

The Marquise was, therefore, left planted as one too many; a situation to which she, the spoiled child of society, was so unaccustomed, that she could have cried with vexation, but for the revenge now literally within her grasp.

So she peered, and watched, and waited, like a Grey Musketeer skirmishing.

Madame de Parabére, observing the Regent's attention engaged elsewhere, whispered something to George, looking insolently the while at his companion, and laughed.

Then the Marquise primed her weapon, as it were, and shook the powder well up in the pan. A leaf of the rare bouquet peeped from under its covering.

Madame de Parabére, flirting and ogling outrageously, as was her custom, whispered again in Captain George's ear, with a little affected laugh. It seemed to the eager watcher that her lips shaped the hated syllables—"Mulatto."

It was time to take aim now, sure and deadly, preparatory to giving fire. A cluster of stephano-

tis showed out like ivory against the smooth black satin.

Madame de Parabére clapped her hands and exclaimed with a child's glee: "But, madame, what a bouquet! Madame is indeed fortunate! Such flowers are not to be procured within leagues of Paris. How exquisite! How ravishing! Madame is so good. Madame will permit me to have one little breath of their fragrance. Only one!"

The Marquise hesitated. An instinct of womanly forbearance prompted mercy even to another woman. Vindictive as she felt, and with her finger on the trigger, she would yet spare her, she thought; but the insolent creature should know her enemy, and should be taught that even the Regent's favourite could not command such bouquets as the acknowledged beauty of the Court.

"They were sent me as a gift, madame," she observed haughtily, and withholding the flowers. "I value them because ours are not yet blown at the Hôtel Montmirail."

"Pardon, madame!" retorted the other, unable, now that she knew her, to forego this opening for a thrust. "Tropical, of course! From an admirer, madame? or perhaps a kinsman? Very

dark, no doubt, and with close curled hair. I offer you my compliments from the bottom of my heart!"

No quarter now. She had rushed upon her fate, and must be shot down, without the least compunction. "If madame will deign to accept my bouquet," said the Marquise, "she will do me the highest honour." And she displayed the whole of it, a wonder of nature, brought to perfection by art.

Madame de Parabére, giddy, thoughtless, fond of flowers, stretched her hand out eagerly, and Captain George, whose attention the Regent's conversation had diverted from this passage of arms between the ladies, turned round while she was in the act of putting them enthusiastically to her face.

He saw the situation at a glance, and his promptitude served him as usual.

"I must be ready for your Highness!" he exclaimed hurriedly, addressing the Regent, but with his eye fixed on the treacherous flowers. "Madame, I have the honour of wishing you a good-night!" he added in the same breath, while with an energetic flourish of his cocked hat he knocked them clean out of the lady's hands to a

few paces' distance on the floor, letting the hat follow; and as he recovered the latter, crushing the bouquet to pieces, as if inadvertently, beneath his foot. It was the second time he had practised this manœuvre within twelve hours, and he was perfect in his lesson.

Rising with an affectation of great confusion, he made his excuses to Madame de Parabére, contriving, amongst a torrent of phrases, to convey, unobserved, the single word "Beware!" And she understood him, contenting herself with a glance of intense gratitude, and an inward vow she would never rest till she had found opportunity to repay both friend and foe.

The Regent laughed heartily at the joke. "You must have supped already, my friend," said he, "and not spared the wine-flask. So much the better! you are all the fitter for your night's work. Come! let us be moving. It is time we were off!"

Madame de Montmirail stood a while stupefied, paralyzed, as it were, at the failure of an attack thus foiled by the last person in whom she expected to find an opponent. The first instant, she could have hated him with all the fierceness of baffled rage. The next, she felt she had never

loved him half so well as now. He had thwarted her; he had tamed her; he had saved her from crime, from ruin, from *herself!* All in one glance of the keen eye, one turn of the ready hand. She acknowledged him for her master, and to her such a sentiment was as fascinating as it was new. She would have liked to burst out crying, and kneel at his feet, imploring to be forgiven, had time and place permitted so romantic an exhibition. At least, she could not let him go without another word, and Captain George, following the Regent through the crowd towards the door, felt a hand laid timidly on his arm, heard a broken voice whispering softly in his ear.

She trembled all over. Her very lips shook while she murmured, "Forgive me, monsieur! I must explain all. I *must* see you again. Where do you go to-night?"

"To sup with his Highness," answered the Musketeer, keeping the Duke's figure in sight as it threaded the jostling, shifting throng of noisy revellers.

"But that is not till midnight," she urged. "He said something about duty. You are brave! You are rash! For heaven's sake, promise you will not rush into needless danger!"

He laughed good-humouredly, and reassured her at once. "Danger, madame! Nothing of the kind. I can trust you not to gossip. It is a mere frolic. We are going a league or two out of Paris, *to raise the devil!*" And observing the Duke turning back for him, he escaped from her, and was lost in the crowd.

She looked longingly after him, and sighed. "To raise the devil!" she repeated, pressing both hands on her heart. "And not the only one to-night. Alas! you have raised one here, that none but yourself can lay!"

Then the Marquise, still retaining her disguise, passed hastily through the ball, till she reached the street, and gaining her carriage, was driven straight home to the Hôtel Montmirail, weeping, softly and patiently, behind her mask.

CHAPTER XVI.

RAISING THE DEVIL.

THE Black Musketeers on duty cleared a lane for the Regent at the door, and the lower orders, with whom, despite his bad character, a certain joviality of manner made him no small favourite, cheered vociferously as he passed. "The Débonnaire goes home early," said one. "He has a child in the pot for supper," shouted another. "I wish his Highness would ask me to eat with him!" exclaimed a third; "Or drink with him!" added a fourth; while a little hunchback, hideous and distorted, observed, in a dry, shrill voice, that made itself heard above all the clamour, "His Highness has a *rendez-vous*, I tell you! Lads, where are your

manners? Débonnaire! send me the bones to pick when you've done with them!"

A peal of laughter and a volley of cheers followed his state-coach as it rolled off at a slow, lumbering trot, with which a man on foot could easily keep up. Captain George had been directed to do so, and accompanied it to the entrance of a gloomy narrow street, where the tall cloaked figure of Bras-de-Fer was waiting according to orders. Here it stopped, the Regent alighted rapidly, and signing to his coachman to drive on, dived into a gulf of darkness, closely attended by the Musketeer and his comrade.

A few paces brought them to an open *caléche*, drawn by a pair of English horses, driven from the saddle, and containing one solitary occupant, also enveloped in a cloak, who leaped out when he heard footsteps, and uncovered while he assisted the Regent to his place. He then seated himself opposite; Bras-de-Fer followed his example; Captain George, at a signal from the Duke, placed himself by his Highness, and in a few minutes the whole party were across the Seine, beyond the barrier, which had been thrown back, and clattering along a paved road at a gallop through the open country.

The moon came out as they cleared Paris, and

each man looked in the other's face to read, according to their respective temperaments, signs of amusement, self-confidence, anxiety, or alarm. The Duke, though nervous, seemed strung to a certain pitch of resolution. Bras-de-Fer swelled with pride at the royal confidence thus reposed in him; and Captain George smiled quietly to mark the trepidation of their fourth companion, none other than Signor Stefano Bartoletti—chemist, philosopher, astrologer, professor of medicine, mathematics, and magic, black or white, as required.

It is strange how the most effective impostors become so saturated, as it were, with their profession, that they cannot resist the influence of a vague enthusiasm, which breeds artificial belief, fascinating, though transparently absurd, in the tricks they themselves practise. Perhaps there is something of the true artist in every man who succeeds, whatever be the nature of his enterprise; and the true artist can never place himself entirely apart from, or outside of, his art. Signor Bartoletti, who had engaged to raise the enemy of mankind for the Regent's gratification, was unquestionably the most nervous of the whole party, lest they should be taken at their word.

Captain George, to begin with, anticipated

nothing but a trick, and took the matter, therefore, as coolly as he did everything else unconnected with Cerise de Montmirail. Bras-de-Fer, on the contrary, was persuaded he should be called on to confront the arch-fiend in person; but believing himself a good Catholic, while he knew he was an excellent swordsman, his courage rose, and he smiled grimly in his moustache at the thought of so distinguished an adversary. Even the devil, he argued, could not be much worse than Marlborough's Grenadiers, and he had faced them many a time without getting the worst of the encounter. He even calculated whether he might not bring into play, with considerable effect, the thrust lately introduced into the corps by Beaudésir, but postponed further consideration of the point till he should know what kind of weapons were to be used in the field. The Regent, excited, credulous, impressible, loving the marvellous, and inclined to believe anything that was *not* in the Bible, found his spirits rise with the anticipation of a new distraction, and being in that exalted state which those experience at rare intervals whose orgies are alternated with strong intellectual labour, found himself actually dreading a disappointment in the vision he anticipated.

Bartoletti felt how uncomfortably it would turn out, if, after all the pains of Malletort and himself to instruct the actress in her part, after all their care in scenery, decorations, and rehearsal, the original should take it into his head to assist at the performance in person!

Ere they were a league out of Paris his teeth began to chatter, though his breath smelt strong of the last suck of brandy that had comforted him before they started.

The English horses drew them swift as the wind. It seemed but a short half-hour ere they stopped at a gate opening into a wood, shadowy, dark, and dreadful, after the dusty road and level meadows glistening silver-white in the moonlight. The two Musketeers, accustomed to look about them, perceived at their feet a track of wheels, which had obviously preceded their carriage. Bras-de-Fer felt a little disappointed.

"L'affaire commence!" whispered the Regent, loosening his sword as he prepared to follow Bartoletti through the wood; "keep close to me, gentlemen, and look that we be not taken in rear!"

The path was narrow, winding, and exceedingly dark; but after a furlong or two the party emerged

on an open space, and found their progress stopped by a level wall of rock, hewn perfectly smooth, and several yards in height. Bathed in a strong moonlight, every particle on its gritty surface glistened like crystal, and its crest of stunted trees and thick-growing shrubs cut clear and black against the cloudless sky.

Here the adept halted and looked round. "Highness," he whispered, "we have reached our journey's end; have you courage to enter the cave?"

The Duke's face was pale, but he glanced at his two Musketeers, and answered, "After you, monsieur!"

Then the four, in Indian file, turned through an opening, or rather a mere hole in the rock, to follow a low, narrow passage, in which, ere they had advanced three paces, the darkness became impenetrable. They groped their way in silence, each listening to the hard breathing of his predecessor, Bras-de-Fer, who was last, fervently hoping their ghostly enemy might not attack them until, as he would have expressed it, they could "deploy into line."

The corridor, however, as we may call it, grew wider and loftier at every step. Presently they marched upright, and two abreast. There was a

constant drip from the damp stone that encircled them, and the hard smooth surface on which they trod felt cool and refreshing to their feet.

Bras-de-Fer could not restrain a sneeze. It resounded above their heads, and died away farther and fainter in a hundred whispering echoes.

Bartoletti started violently, and the Duke's hand went to his sword. Then the magician halted, pulled a vial from his breast, and dipping a match in it, produced a strong rose-coloured flame, from which he lit the small lamp that hung at his belt.

Whilst the match flared and shone, they saw plainly for several yards in every direction. They were in a low vaulted cavern, hewn, to all appearance, by no mortal hands out of the rock. They stood on a slightly elevated platform, and at their feet lay a glistening sheet of black that could only be water. It was, however, a hasty examination, for the match soon spent itself, and Bartoletti's lamp gave but light enough, as Bras-de-Fer observed, "to show how dark it was."

"Are we on the banks of the Seine or the Styx?" asked the Regent, jestingly, yet with a slight tremor in his voice.

"Man knoweth not whither this dark stream

may lead," replied Bartoletti, solemnly, lighting at the same time a spare wick of his lamp, to embark it on a morsel of wood which he pushed into the current.

For several minutes, as it seemed to their watching eyes, the light floated farther and farther, till swallowed up by degrees in the black distance.

All were now somewhat impressed with the gloom and mysterious silence of the place. Bartoletti took courage, and informed the Regent he was about to begin.

"Not till you have drawn a pentacle!" objected the Duke, apprehensively. "Such a precaution should on no account be neglected."

"It is unnecessary, Highness," answered the other. "Against the lesser fiends, indeed, it forms an impregnable defence; but he who is approaching now, the very Prince of Darkness himself, cares no more for a pentacle than you do!"

The Regent would not be satisfied however till, under Malletort's superintendence, he had drawn with the point of his sword a circle and triangle in magic union on the bare rock. Then he ensconced himself carefully within his lines, and bade the magician "go on."

After a considerable display of mummery, and the repetition of many sentences, which, as they were couched in Latin, Bartoletti felt would be liable to little criticism from his listeners, he produced a small bundle of shavings from under his cloak, and piling these on the water's-edge, poured over the heap certain essences, ere he set the whole on fire. The cavern now became filled with a thick cloud of smoke, fragrant in smell, and though stupefying to the senses not suffocating the lungs. Reflected in the black water beneath, as the flames waved and leaped and flickered, the unsteady light produced an effect of vast and shadowy distance on the dim recesses of the cavern, and prepared the minds of the spectators for some vague, uncertain, yet awful result.

Plunging it once more into his bundle, Bartoletti spread his hand over the embers. A blue lurid glare, that turned all their faces ashen white, now replaced the shifting wavering light of the flames.

"It is the death-fire!" whispered the Italian, and touching the Duke's shoulder, he pointed to the roof of the cavern.

A gigantic arm and hand, with forefinger pointed downwards, were shadowed distinctly on its ribbed and slimy surface.

The Duke trembled and sweat stood on his brow; Bartoletti, too, shivered, though with less reason. Captain George nodded approvingly, and Bras-de-Fer pulled the buckle of his sword-belt to the front.

"You may ask three questions," whispered the shaking Italian. "Not another syllable, if you would leave the cave alive!"

The Duke cleared his throat to speak, and his voice came dry and husky while he formed the words with effort, like a man using a foreign tongue.

"I adjure you tell me truly, who is my chief enemy?"

Not one of them drew breath whilst they waited for the answer; and the questioner himself looked down to see that his feet were scrupulously within the pentacle.

It came sad, solemn, and as if from a distance, chanted in a full, mournful and melodious tone:—

"The foes a prince behoves to dread, that turn and tear their Lord,
Are those that haunt about his bed, and blush beside his board."

Then the Regent, gaining courage, asked in a firmer voice, "Who is my best friend?"

The reply was more distinct, and its clear emphasis seemed to vouch for the speaker's truth, Father of lies though he might be called :—

"One friend is thine, whose silent kiss clings subtle, sure and fast.
When all shall fail, yet shall not this, the swiftest, though the last."

Thus encouraged, the royal questioner gathered heart with every fresh answer, and it was in his customary unrestrained tone that he propounded his last inquiry, "Shall I live to wear the crown of France?"

This time, however, the phantom arm waved backwards and forwards, clenching its gigantic hand, while the demon's voice seemed again to rise from distant and mysterious depths, as it replied :—

"When woman's love can trust thy vows, when woman's guileless glance
Can thrill thy breast, bind on thy brows the diadem of France!
Enough! For more I dare not tell. Glad life, and lusty reign!
Predestined Prince, and fare thee well!—till we shall meet again!"

In five minutes all were once more in the open air. The Regent, grave and preoccupied, spoke not a word while they passed swiftly through the wood to gain their carriage; but Bras-de-Fer

whispered in his comrade's ear: "It seems the devil is like the rest, and had rather not come to close quarters with the Grey Musketeers:" to which professional remark Captain George replied, thoughtfully—

"He is an adversary for whom I would choose a weapon that kept me as far off him as possible!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A QUIET SUPPER.

IN less than an hour, how changed the scene for two of the actors in that mysterious drama—of which Bartoletti was chief manager and Malletort sat in the prompter's box! The Captain of Musketeers had been invited to sup with the Regent, and found in his prince's private apartments a little party collected, whose mirth and high spirits were well calculated to drive away any remains of superstitious gloom left by the incantations of the cavern, and their result.

The select suppers of the Duke of Orleans were conducted with an absence of ceremony or restraint that indeed degenerated on occasion into the grossest license; but even under the Regency

men did not necessarily conclude every night in the week with an orgy, and the mirth of the *roués*, themselves, was not always degraded into drunkenness, nor their wit pushed to profanity and shameless indecency of speech.

Captain George found himself seated at a round table in an oval room, of which the only other occupants, besides his royal host, were Madame de Parabère, Madame de Sabran, Malletort, and Count Point d'Appui. The latter, be it observed, excelled (for no one was admitted to these *réunions* who had not some marked speciality) in the grace with which he danced a minuet and the gravity with which he propounded the emptiest and silliest remarks. Some of the courtiers affected to think this simplicity only masked an intriguing disposition, and that Point d'Appui was, after all, "not quite such a fool as he looked:" a charitable suggestion, endorsed by Madame de Sabran with the observation, "The Saints forbid he should be!"

Altogether it was generally admitted that the Count's strong point must be sought rather in his heels than his head. He sat directly opposite the Musketeer, and next to Abbé Malletort, who was between him and Madame de Sabran. The latter

was thus placed opposite the Regent, at whose right hand Madame de Parabére had taken up her usual post. Captain George found himself accordingly with a lady on either side, and as he was distinguished, manly, quiet in manner, and, above all, supposed to be impenetrable of heart, he became an object of interest to both.

These hated each other, of course, but in a treacherous, well-bred manner, and not so rancorously as to spoil their appreciation of an excellent repast, served in pleasant company, under all the most promising conditions for success. They were therefore, outwardly, wondrous affectionate, and under protest as it were, with the buttons on their foils, could be good companions enough.

The Duke prided himself on his suppers. Working at state affairs during the day, and with a digestion considerably impaired by habitual excess, dinner was a mere matter of form, often restricted indeed to a morsel of bread and a cup of chocolate, served in the cabinet where he wrote. But when the hours of business were past, and his system, too much gorged over-night, had recovered from the fumes of wine and the torpor of repletion, it was his delight to rush once more

into those excesses of appetite which unfitted his mornings for exertion, which robbed him of half his existence while he lived, and killed him in the prime of manhood at last.

But he understood well how the sacrifice should be offered. The supper-room, we have said, was oval, panneled in a light cheerful wood, highly varnished, and decorated only by short pithy sentences, inlaid in gaudy colours, of which the purport was to crop the flower while it bloomed, to empty the cup while it sparkled, practically to eat the cutlet while it was hot, and consume as eagerly as possible the good things provided for the senses. No pictures, no vases, no works of art were suffered upon the walls to distract the attention of the guests from their main object. The intellect, as seated at the farthest distance from the stomach, might indeed be gently stimulated with wit, but the imagination, the feelings, above all, the emotions that affect the heart, were on no account to be disturbed during the ecstasies of the palate or the pleasing languor and subsequent comfort of digestion. Not a lackey nor servant of any kind entered the room. When one course had been consumed, deliberately, methodically, and with much practical comment on its merits, the table

sank slowly through the floor, to be replaced by another, bearing fresh dishes, fresh flowers, fresh napkins, everything fresh prepared, to the very bills of fare, beautifully emblazoned, that lay beside the cover of each guest. A strong light from above was shaded to throw its rays directly on the board; but as plenty of this enlivener is conducive to festivity, numerous lamps with bright reflectors flashed at short distances from the walls. No pealing band deafened the ears of the sitters, or drowned their conversation in its overpowering strains; only ever and anon a faint long-drawn note, like the tone of a far-distant organ, rose and fell and wavered, ere it died sweetly and calmly away.

On these occasions, Point d'Appui never failed to pause, even with a tempting morsel on his fork, and intimate to his neighbours that "he was passionately given to music, and it reminded him of heaven!"

The Regent seemed much impressed with the visit he had made to the cavern before supper, and it was not till he had emptied several goblets of champagne that he regained his usual spirits. With the influence of wine, however, his nerves recovered their tone, his eye brightened, his hand

steadied, and he joined in conversation as heretofore.

By this time a favourite dish had made its appearance, which went by the name of the *pâté d'Orléans*. It consisted of the wings of pheasants and other white game, boned, stuffed, and so manipulated as to resemble the limbs of children; a similarity that gave rise to the most hideous rumours amongst the lower classes. Many a worthy gossip in Paris believed firmly that two or three infants were consumed nightly at the Regent's table, and none seemed to relish the report more than himself. He ate vigorously of the *pâté*, emptied another goblet, and began to talk. Madame de Parabére watched him closely. Something was going on she had not fathomed, but she resolved to be at the bottom of it.

"Abbé!" shouted the Duke, "what are you about? Do you think I would suffer little heathens on my table, that you baptize them with water? They are the best of Christians I tell you, my friend, and should be well soused, like all good Christians, in wine." Malletort, who had been pouring stealthily out of a *caraffe* at his elbow, accepted his host's challenge and filled up from a flask.

"To your health, Highness! and confusion to your enemies—White and Red," said he, pointing to two measures of those Burgundies that happened to stand before the ladies.

The Duke started. Malletort's observation, simple as it seemed, brought the diabolical prophecy to his mind, and again he sought courage from his glass.

"Do you mean that for *us*, monsieur?" asked Madame de Sabran. "Since his Highness loves the Burgundy too well to count it a foe, though it has put him on his back, I doubt not, often enough."

"Nay, madame," answered the Abbé, bowing politely; "such as you can never be foes since you are born to be conquerors. If it *did* come to a fight, I presume you would grant no quarter."

"None," said she, laughing. "Church and laymen, we should put you all to the sword."

"But the Church are non-combatants," interposed Count Point d'Appui, with perfect sincerity. "You would be excommunicated by our Father the Pope. It is a different species, madame, altogether; a separate race."

"Not a bit of it!" answered the lady. "Men to the tips of their fingers, every one of them!

Are you not, Abbé? No! When all is said and done, there are but two distinct creations, and I never can believe they have a common origin. Men and women I put in the one, princes and lackeys in the other. What say *you*, madame?"

But Madame de Parabére said nothing. She sat in silence, pouting, because it suited the shape of her mouth, and listening, for other reasons of her own.

The Regent, who had now drunk wine enough to be both easily offended and appeased, felt that the shaft aimed at him was not entirely undeserved. So he asked in anger, "How mean you, madame? I see not the drift of your jest. In what are princes and lackeys so alike, and so different from the rest of mankind?"

"Other bipeds," answered the lady, bitterly, "lie from habit, with intention, or on occasion; but this variety never speak the truth at all, even by accident."

The Duke's face turned purple. Captain George, hoping to divert an explosion, and feeling that he had been invited rather as a compliment than for the sake of his society, rose and took his leave, on the score of military duty, receiving, as he went out, a glance from Madame de Parabére's beautiful

eyes, that assured him of her gratitude, her interest, and her good-will.

His departure changed the subject of conversation. In two minutes, the Regent forgot he had been offended, and Madame de Sabran was busied in the unworthy task of mystifying Count Point d'Appui, an employment which her rival contemplated with a drowsy, languid air, as if she could hardly keep herself awake.

The Abbé had watched her for some time with increasing interest and considerable misgivings; the poison, he thought, should long ere this have taken effect, and he expected every moment to observe a disturbance of the placid features, a discoloration of the beautiful skin. Before supper was over, he concluded that, as far as the flowers were concerned, his plot had failed; but Malletort did not now need to learn the archer's want of another arrow in the quiver, a spare string for the bow: it behoved him only to make the more use of such implements as he had kept in reserve.

All his energy and all his cunning had been brought into play during the night. Without his assistance, he felt sure the mummery of the cavern must have failed, for he could trust neither the shaking nerves of the Italian nor the superstitious

self-deception of the Quadroon. It was no easy task to return to Paris so swiftly as to change his dress, show himself at a reception in the Faubourg St. Germain, and thence proceed leisurely to sup with the Regent. Well-bred horses, however, and a well-broke valet, had accomplished this part of the undertaking with a few seconds to spare. It now remained to play the last and most difficult strokes of the game. He felt equal to the occasion.

Moving round the table with his glass, in unceremonious fashion, he took advantage of George's departure to place himself between Madame de Parabére and her host, whispering in that lady's ear, "I have a favour to ask of the Regent, in which you, too, are interested!" She made room for him carelessly, listlessly, and her face looked so innocent and unsuspicious as to delude even his acuteness into the belief that the few faculties she could command were engrossed by Point d'Appui and his tormentor.

These were in full swing at a game called, in England, Flirtation. It is an elastic process, embracing an extensive area in the field of gallantry, and so far resembling the tournaments of the Middle Ages, that while its encounters are presumed to be waged with weapons of courtesy,

blunted for bloodless use, such fictitious conflicts very frequently bring on the real combat *à l'outrance* with sharp weapons, and then, as in other death-struggles, *væ victis!* If girth breaks, or foot slips, the fallen fighter must expect no mercy.

Pitted against Point d'Appui, Madame de Sabran might be likened to an accomplished swordsman practising cut and thrust on a wooden trunk. But the block was good-natured and good-looking. When such is the case, I have observed that a witty woman takes no small delight in the exercise of her talent. There is a generosity about the sex not sufficiently appreciated, and if a man will only keep quiet, silent, receptive, and immoveable, it will pour its treasures at his feet in a stream of lavish and inexhaustible profusion.

Point d'Appui contented himself with looking very handsome and drinking a great deal of Burgundy. His neighbour hacked and hewed him, without intermission, and Madame de Parabére's attention seemed entirely engrossed by the pair.

Malletort, in possession of the Regent's ear, proceeded diligently with the edifice for which he had so artfully laid the foundations.

"I must ask permission to take my leave early

to-night, Highness," observed the Churchman, "like our friend the Musketeer, who has served his purpose, by the way, as I learn, so may be rubbed out of the calculation ; and I must drink no more of this excellent Burgundy, for I have promised to present myself in a lady's drawing-room, late as it is, before I go to bed."

Though somewhat confused by wine, the Regent understood his confidant's meaning perfectly well, and his eye kindled as he gathered its purport. "I will accompany you, little Abbé," he whispered, with a hiccough, and a furtive glance at the ladies lest they should overhear.

"Too late, my Prince," answered the other, "and useless besides even for you, since I have not yet obtained permission. Oh! trust me. The fortress is well guarded, and has scarce ever been summoned, much less has it offered a parley."

The Duke looked disappointed, but emptied another bumper. He was rapidly arriving at the state Malletort desired, when a well-turned compliment would have induced him to sign away the crown of France.

"To-morrow then!" he grunted, with his hand on the Abbé's shoulder. "The great Henry used to say—what used he to say? Something about

waiting; you remember, Abbé. *Basta!* Reach me the Burgundy."

"To-morrow, Highness," answered Malletort, more and more respectfully as his patron became less able to enforce respect. "At the hour agreed on, I will be at your orders, with everything requisite. There is but one more detail, and though indispensable, I fear to press it with your Highness now, for it trenches on business, and your brain, like mine, must be somewhat heated with the Burgundy."

Probably no other consideration on earth would have induced the Duke to look at a paper after supper, but this remark about the Burgundy touched him nearly.

He took pride in his convivial powers, and remembering that Henri Quatre was said to have drunk a glass of red wine before his infant lips had tasted mother's milk, always vowed that he inherited from that ancestor a constitution with which the juice of the grape assimilated itself harmlessly as food.

"Burgundy, little Abbé!" he repeated, staring vacantly at Malletort, who had produced a small packet and an inkhorn from his pockets; "Burgundy, Beaune, brandy—these do but serve to

clear the brains of a Bourbon! Give me the paper!"

"It is only your signature, Highness," said Malletort, sitting completely round, so as to interpose his person between Madame de Parabére and the sheet under his hand. "I can fill it up afterwards, to save you further trouble."

But a drunkard's cunning is the last faculty that forsakes him. Though the paper danced and wavered beneath his gaze, he detected at once that it was a *lettre de cachet*, formidable, henceforth, from the edict issued that day in Council.

Without troubling himself to inquire how the document came into Malletort's possession, who had indeed free access to his *bureau*, he wagged his head gravely, exclaiming with the good-humoured persistency of inebriety—

"No! no! little Abbé. A thousand times no! I fill in the names myself. Oh! I am Regent of France. I know what I am doing. Here, give me the pen."

He scrawled his signature on the page, and waited for Malletort to speak.

The latter glanced furtively round—Madame de Sabran was laughing, the Count listening, Madame de Parabére yawning. No one seemed to pay

attention. Nevertheless he was still cautious. Mentioning no names, he looked expressively at the Musketeer's vacant place while he whispered, "We have done with him. He has fulfilled his task. Let him be well taken care of. He deserves it, and it is indispensable."

"What is indispensable, must be!" answered the Duke carelessly, and filled in the name of the victim on the blank space left for it.

Then he sprinkled some blue sand from the Abbé's portable writing-case over the characters, and because they did not dry fast enough, turned the sheet face downwards on the white table-cloth, and passed his wrist once or twice across the back.

When he lifted it, the ink had marked the damask, which was of the finest texture and rarest pattern in Europe.

Malletort never neglected a precaution. Reaching his hand to a flask of white Hermitage, and exclaiming, "We chemists are never without resource," he was about to pour from it on the table, when a soft voice murmured languidly, "Give me a few drops, monsieur, I am thirsty," and Madame de Parabére, half turning round, held her glass out to be helped.

He was forced to comply, but in another second

had flooded the ink-marks with Hermitage, and blurred the stains on the cloth into one faded shapeless blot.

Madame de Parabére's face remained immoveable, and her fine eyes looked sleepy as ever, yet in that second she had read a capital *G* with a small *r*, reversed, and had drawn her own conclusions.

There is but one sentiment in a woman's mind stronger than gratitude; its name is Love. Nevertheless, her love for the Regent was not so overpowering as to shake her determination that she would save the Captain of Musketeers at any sacrifice.

Meanwhile, the object of her solicitude returned to his quarters by way of the Hôtel Montmirail, coasting the dead wall surrounding that mansion very slowly, and absorbed in his own reflections. To reach it he diverged considerably from his direct road, although the guard posted in its vicinity consisted that night of Black Musketeers, who were not to be relieved till the next afternoon by their comrades of the Grey Company. To prove their vigilance seemed, however, the aim of Captain George's walk, for after a brief reconnoitre he retired quietly to rest about the time that his

royal host, with the assistance of two valets, staggered from banqueting-room to bed-chamber.

And no wonder, for notwithstanding a liberal consumption of champagne, the flasks of red and white Burgundy stood empty on the supper-table.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BAITING THE TRAP.

IN transactions with womankind, the sharpest of men are apt to overlook in their calculations the paramount influence of dress.

Malletort had long ago expressed an opinion on the despotism of King Chiffon, but he little expected to be thwarted by that monarch in dealing with one of his most devoted subjects. When Captain George knocked the poisoned bouquet out of Madame de Parabére's hand, with a happy awkwardness seldom displayed in ball-rooms, a cluster of its blossoms caught in the flounces of her dress. Despite languor of manner and immobility of feature, this lady possessed coolness, resolution, and resource in emergency. She concealed the stray

cluster in her handkerchief, said nothing about it, took it home, put it under glass, and then locked it carefully away in a cabinet. After she had heard mass next morning, she walked quietly off to Bartoletti's house, attended by two armed domestics and accompanied by her maid, as if going to buy cosmetics, and produced the blossoms for that unwilling chemist to analyse. The Signor, to tell truth, was always averse to tampering with poisons, although in the way of business it was difficult to keep clear of them. As, on the present occasion, he felt nothing was to be gained by falsehood, as Madame de Parabére was a dangerous enemy to provoke, and above all, as she paid him liberally, he produced his tests without delay, and informed her she had narrowly escaped loss of beauty if not of life, by the inhalation of a subtle and effectual poison.

The Signor argued in this way. He compromised nobody, neither was it any business of his that certain ingredients, sold to a brother student in separate quantities, had been scientifically mingled and sprinkled over these treacherous exotics. With the sums he had lately received from the Abbé on different accounts—with the liberal reward now brought him by Madame de Parabére—with the

proceeds from his shares in Mississippi stock, of a feverish rise in which he had, by his friend's advice, taken immediate advantage—with the sale of his wine, pictures, plate, and furniture—lastly, with the firm determination to abscond promptly, leaving his debts unpaid, he should find himself master of so much wealth as would enable him to purchase the freedom of Célandine (at a damaged valuation), to marry her, and settle down somewhere, perhaps under the glowing sky of the tropics, in luxury and scientific indolence for the rest of his life.

Sensualist and impostor though he was, the man had yet some glimmering of a better and nobler existence than his necessities had hitherto permitted him to lead. He saw himself basking in the sun, sleeping in the shade, eating luxuriantly, drinking of the best, lying soft, yet devoting his leisure to the interests of science, and, when it did not interfere with his gratifications, giving those who needed help the benefit of his medical experience and advice. There are few but can be pitiful while they want occupation, and generous while it costs them nothing but a word.

When Bartoletti attended his visitor to the door, he felt it would be neither wise nor prudent to remain longer in Paris.

Madame de Parebére did not act without reflection. She possessed in his own handwriting, with his own signature attached, the chemist's analysis of the noxious essences that had been offered her in a nosegay; and although Bartoletti extorted the price of a necklace for it, she felt the document was cheap at the money. Instinct told her that in the Marquise de Montmirail she had found a rival; but reason assured her also that with such proofs as she now possessed she could ruin any rival in the Regent's good graces as soon as he had slept off the effects of last night's wine. Though his whole afternoon, as often happened, might be engaged, she must meet her royal admirer that evening at the opera. He should then be put in possession of the facts, and woe to the traitress when he knew the truth!

"We shall see, madame!" said the lady between her small white teeth, under the sweet, calm face, and crossing herself as she passed a crucifix in the street. "We shall see! A *lettre de cachet* is a very compromising *billet-doux*, but it may be sent to a lady quite as appropriately as a gentleman. That reminds me! Business first—pleasure afterwards; gratitude to-day—vengeance to-night. I will preserve that brave Musketeer, if it costs me

my rank and my reputation. Oh ! if men were all prompt, generous, honourable, like him, how differently we poor women should behave ! I wonder if we should be much better, or much worse !"

The maid walking at her side thought she was repeating an "Ave," and appreciating the temptations of her mistress, greatly admired so edifying a display of piety under difficulties.

Madame de Parabére was perfectly right in believing she would have no opportunity for conversation with the Regent till they met at the opera. The whole of that Prince's morning was employed in struggling with the drowsy fiend who on a sensualist's couch represents sleep, and is such a hideous mockery of its original. At these hours the tendency to apoplexy, which the Duke strengthened and pampered by indulgence, displayed itself in alarming colours, and none of his attendants could have been surprised when, a few years later, the Destroyer swooped down and carried off his prey at a stroke. It took him many an hour of heavy, unhealthy, and disturbed slumber to regain sufficient clearness of mind for the duties of the day, but once in exercise, his intellect, which was doubtless above mediocrity, soon reasserted itself, and the Prince, shaved, bathed, dressed, and seated

over a pile of papers in his cabinet, seemed quite capable of grasping the political helm, and guiding with a steady hand the destinies of France. But it was only by a strong mental effort he thus overcame the effects of his pernicious habits; such an effort as, when often repeated, saps the vital energies beyond the power of nature to restore them, and the wasting effects of which are best conveyed by the familiar expression—"burning the candle at both ends."

When business was concluded, and the Regent, leaving his cabinet, entered the adjoining dressing-room to prepare for amusement, he was generally much fatigued, but in excellent spirits. A thorough Bourbon, he could work if it was necessary, but his native element was play. When he shut up his portfolio the virtual King of France felt like a boy out of school.

It was in such a mood the Abbé Malletort found him the afternoon succeeding his necromantic visit to the cavern. The valets were dismissed, the wardrobe stood open, various suits of clothes hung on chairs or lay scattered about the floor, yet it seemed the visitor was expected; for no sooner did he enter than the door was locked, and his Highness, taking him by the shoulders, accosted him with a rough, good-humoured welcome.

"True to time," said he, in a boisterous yet somewhat nervous tone. "True and punctual as a tailor, a confessor, and a creditor should be!—since for me, little Abbé, you combine these several characters in one! A tailor, for you must dress me; a confessor, for you know most of my sins already, and I have no desire to conceal from you the remainder; and a creditor, because I owe you a heavy debt of gratitude which you need not fear I shall forget to pay!"

"Tailor and confessor as much as your Highness pleases," answered the Abbé, "but creditor, no! I had rather possess the free assurance of the Regent's goodwill than his name to a blank assignment on the Bank of France! It is my pride and my pleasure to be at your service, and only when the Duke shall propose a scheme to his own manifest disadvantage will the Abbé find courage to expostulate or refuse."

"I can trust you, I believe," answered the Regent, "none the less, my friend, that your interests and mine are identical. If d'Orleans were at Dourlens, and Du Maine at the Tuileries, it is just possible Malletort might find himself at Vincennes. What say you, my adventurous Abbé? Such an '*alerte*' would call every man to his post! No; where I gain

an inch, I pull you up a metre; but in return, if I make a false step in the *entresol*, you tumble down two pair of stairs and break your neck in the street! Yes—I think I can trust you."

Malletort laughed pleasantly. "Your Highness's ethics are like my own," said he. "There is no tie so close as self-interest, and it is certainly none the looser when accompanied by inclination. I trust the events of to-night will render it yet more binding on us both."

"Have you prepared everything?" asked the Regent, with anxiety. "The slightest omission might be not only inconvenient, but dangerous."

"I have but a short note to write," answered the Abbé, "and I can accomplish that while your Highness finishes dressing. It must be sealed with the arms of the royal Body-guard, and you may believe I have no such uncanonical trinkets in my possession."

The Duke looked in a drawer and shook his head. Then he called a valet, who appeared from the adjoining chamber.

"Go to the officer of the guard," said he, "and ask him for the regimental seal. Say it is for *me*."

The man returned almost immediately, indeed

before the Abbé had finished a note on which he was engaged, writing it slowly and with great care.

"Who is on guard?" he asked carelessly, while the servant set the massive seal on the table.

"Monsieur George," was the answer, "Captain of the Company of Grey Musketeers."

The Abbé did not look up, but continued assiduously bent over his task, smiling the while as at some remarkable and whimsical coincidence.

When he had folded his letter carefully, and secured it with the military seal, he begged his Highness, in a tone of great simplicity, to lend him an orderly.

"As many as you please," answered the Regent; "but may I ask the nature of a missive that requires so warlike a messenger?"

"It is a challenge," answered the Abbé, and they both laughed heartily; nor was their mirth diminished when the required orderly, standing gaunt and rigid in the doorway, turned out to be the oldest, the fiercest, and the ugliest veteran in the whole Body-guard.

The sun was now declining, and it would soon be dusk. Malletort urged on the Regent to lose no time in preparing for his enterprise.

"And the opera?" observed the latter, suddenly recollecting his appointment with Madame de Parabére at that entertainment.

"Must be given up for to-night," answered Malletort. "There is no time for your Highness to show yourself in public, and return here for a change of dress. Moreover, your disguise cannot be properly accomplished in a hurry, and to be late by five minutes would render all our plans useless. You have promised to trust everything to me, and if your Highness will be guided by my directions, I can insure you an undoubted success. Give me your attention, I entreat, Monsieur, whilst once more I recapitulate my plan.

"You dismiss, now, on the instant, all your valets, except Robecque, on whom we can depend. With his assistance and mine, you disguise yourself as an officer of Musketeers—Grey, of course, since that company furnishes the guard of to-night. Your Highness can thus pass through their posts, without remark, on giving the countersign supplied this morning by yourself. An escort will be provided from the barracks, at the last moment, by Marshal de Villeroy's orders, without consulting the officer of the guard. This arrangement is indispensable in case of accidents. Every con-

tingency has been anticipated, yet swords might be drawn, and though your Highness loves the clash of steel, the most valuable life in France must not be risked even for such a prize. Ah! you may trust us men of peace to take precautions; and, in *our* profession, when we act with the strong hand, we think we cannot make the hand *too* strong.

"Nevertheless, I anticipate no difficulties whatever. Your Highness, as a gallant Musketeer, will enter the garden of the Hesperides without opposition. There is no dragon that I know of, though people sometimes pay your humble servant the compliment of believing him to hold that post; and once within, it wants but a bold hand to pluck the fruit from the bough. Win it then, my Prince, and wear it happily. Nay, forget not hereafter, that many a man less favoured would have bartered life willingly but to lie prostrate under the tree and look his last on the tempting beauty of the golden apple he might never hope to reach."

There was something unusual in the Abbé's tone, and the Duke, glancing in his face, thought he had turned very pale; but in another moment he was smiling pleasantly at his own awkwardness,

while he assisted the Regent into the uniform, and fitted on the accoutrements of a Musketeer.

It took some little time, and cost many remonstrances from Robecque, who was not gifted with a military eye, to complete the transformation. Nevertheless, by dint of persuasion and perseverance, the moustaches were at length blacked and twisted, the belts adjusted, the boots wrinkled, and the hat cocked with that mixture of ease, fierceness, good-humour, and assumption which was indispensable to a proper conception of the character—a true rendering of the part.

It was somewhat against the grain to resign for a while the attitudes and gestures of Henri Quatre, but even such a sacrifice was little regretted when the Duke scanned himself from top to toe in a long mirror, with a smile of undisguised satisfaction at the result of his toilet.

"'Tis the garrison type to the life!" said he exultingly. "Guard-room, parade, and bivouac combined. Abbé! Abbé! what a flower of Musketeers she spoiled when blind Fortune made me Regent of France!"

CHAPTER XIX.

MATRE PULCHRÂ, FILIA PULCHRIOR.

SINCE Horace wrote that musical ode in which he expresses a poet's admiration pretty equally divided between mother and daughter, how many similes have been exhausted, how many images distorted to convey the touching and suggestive resemblance by which Nature reproduces in the bud a beauty that has bloomed to maturity in the flower! Amongst all the peculiarities of race, family likeness is the commonest, the most prized, and the least understood. Perhaps, because the individuality of women is more easily affected by extraneous influences, it seems usually less impressed upon the sons than the daughters of a House. Then a girl often marries so young, that she has

scarcely done with her girl's graces, certainly lost none of her woman's charms, ere she finds a copy at her side as tall as herself; a very counterpart in figure, voice, eyes, hair, complexion; all the externals in which she takes most pride; whose similarity and companionship are a source of continual happiness, alloyed only by the dread of a contingency that shall make herself a grandmother!

As they sat in the boudoir of the Hôtel Montmirail, enjoying the cool evening breeze at an open window, the Marquise and her daughter might have been likened to a Goddess and a Nymph, a rose and a rosebud—what shall I say?—a cat and her kitten, or a cow and her calf! But although in voice, manner, gestures, and general effect, this similarity was so remarkable, a closer inspection might have found many points of difference; and the girl seemed, indeed, an ideal sketch rather than a finished portrait of the woman, bearing to her mother the vague, spiritualized resemblance that memory bears to presence—your dreams to your waking thoughts.

Cerise was altogether fairer in complexion and fainter in colouring, slenderer, and perhaps a little taller, with more of soul in her blue eyes but less

of intellect, and a pure, serene face that a poet would have fallen down and worshipped, but from which a painter would have turned to study the richer tones of the Marquise.

Some women seem to me like statues, and some like pictures. The latter fascinate you at once, compelling your admiration even on the first glance, while you pass by the former with a mere cold and critical approval. But every man who cares for art must have experienced how the influence of the model or the marble grows on him day by day. How, time after time, fresh baauties seem to spring beneath his gaze as if his very worship called them into life, and how, when he has got the masterpiece by heart, and sees every curve of the outline, every turn of the chisel in his dreams, he no longer wonders that it was not a painter, but a sculptor, who languished to death in hopeless adoration of his handiwork. These statue-women move, in no majestic march, over the necks of captive thousands to the strains of all kinds of music, but stand in their leafy, shadowy nooks apart, teaching a man to love them by degrees, and he never forgets the lesson, nor would he if he could.

It is scarcely necessary to say that the Marquise

loved her daughter very dearly. For years, the child had occupied the first place in her warm impassioned heart. To send Cerise away was the first lesson in self-sacrifice the proud and prosperous lady had ever been forced to learn, and many a tear it used to cost her, when her ball-dress had been folded up and Célandine dismissed for the night. Nor, indeed, was the Quadroon's pillow quite dry when first she lost her nursling; and long after Cerise slept calmly and peacefully between those quiet convent walls, far off in Normandy, the two women would lie broad awake, calling to remembrance the blue eyes and the brown curls and the pretty ways of their darling, till their very hearts ached with longing to look on her once more. Now, since mademoiselle had returned, the Marquise thought she loved her better than ever, and perhaps all the feelings and impulses of a heart not too well-disciplined had of late been called into stronger play.

Madame de Montmirail threw herself back in her chair with an exclamation of pleasure, for the cool, soft breeze lifted the hair from her temples, and stirred the delicate lace edging on her bosom. "It is delightful, my child!" she said, "after the heat of to-day, which was suffocating. And we

have nothing for to-night, I thank the saints with my whole heart! Absolutely nothing! Neither ball, nor concert, nor opera (for I could not sit out another of Cavalli's), nor even a horrid reception at the Luxembourg. This is what I call veritable repose!"

Like all people with a tinge of southern blood, the Marquise cried out at the slightest increase of temperature. Like all fashionable ladies, she professed to consider those gaieties without which she could not live, duty, but martyrdom.

Mademoiselle, however, loved a ball dearly, and was not ashamed to say so. She entered such gatherings, indeed, with something of the nervousness felt by a recruit in his first engagement. The prospect of triumph was enhanced by the chance of danger; but the sense of personal apprehension forcibly overcome, which is, perhaps, the true definition of courage, added elasticity to her spirits, keenness to her intellect, and even charms to her person. Beauty, moving gracefully amongst admiring glances, under a warm light, in a cloud of muslin, carries, perhaps, as high a heart beneath her bodice as beats behind the steel cuirass of Valour, riding his mailed war-horse in triumph through the shock of opposing squadrons.

"And I like going out so much, mamma," said the girl, sitting on a footstool by her chair, and leaning both elbows on her mother's lap. "With you I mean; that must, of course, be understood. Alone in a ball-room without the petticoats of Madame la Marquise, behind which to run when the wolf comes, I should be so frightened, I do believe I should begin to cry! Seriously, mamma, I should not like it at all. Tell me, dear mother, how did you manage at first, when you entered society by yourself?"

"I was never afraid of the wolf," answered the Marquise, laughing, "and lucky for me I was not, since the late king could not endure shy people, and if you showed the slightest symptoms of awkwardness or want of tact you were simply not asked again. But you are joking, my darling; you who need fear no criticism with your youth, your freshness, the best dressmaker in Paris, and all that brown hair which Célandine talks of till the tears stand in her eyes."

"I hate my hair!" interrupted Cerise. "I think it's hideous! I wish it was black, like yours. A horrid man, the other night at 'Madame's,' took me for an Englishwoman! He did, mamma! A Prince Somebody all over decorations. I could

have run a pin into the wretch with pleasure. One of the things I like going out for is to watch my beautiful mamma, and the way to flatter me is to start back and hold up both hands, exclaiming, 'Ah! mademoiselle. None but the blind could take you for anything but the daughter of Madame la Marquise!' The Prince Marshal does it every time we meet. Dear old man! that is why I am so fond of him."

The young lady illustrated this frank confession by an absurd little pantomime that mimicked her veteran admirer to the life, causing her mother to laugh heartily.

"I did not know he was such a favourite," said the Marquise. "You are in luck, my daughter. I expect him to pay us a visit this very evening."

Cerise made a comical little face of disgust.

"I shall go to bed before he catches me, then," she answered; "not that he is the least out of favour; on the contrary, I love him dearly; but when he has been here five minutes, I yawn; in ten, I shut my eyes, and long before he gets to that bridge which Monsieur de Vendôme ought, or ought not, to have blown up—there—it's no use! The thing is stronger than I am, and I go fast asleep."

"And so my little rake is disappointed," said the elder lady, taking her child's pretty head caressingly between her hands. "She would like to have a ball, or a reception, or something that would make an excuse for a sumptuous toilet, and she finds it very wearisome to sit at home, even for one night, and take care of her old mother!"

"Very!" repeated the girl playfully, while her tone made so ungracious an avowal equivalent to the fondest expression of attachment. "My old mother is so cross and so tiresome, and so very *very* old. Now listen, mamma. Shall I have a dress exactly like yours for the ball at the Tuileries? The young king is to dance. I know it, for my dear Prince Marshal told me so while I was still awake. I have never seen a king, only a regent, and I *do* think Monsieur d'Orleans so ugly. Don't tell him, mamma, but our writing-master at the convent was the image of him, and had the same wrinkles in his forehead. He used to wipe our pens in his wig, and we called him 'Pouf-Pouf!' I was the worst writer amongst all the girls, and the best arithmetician. 'Pouf-Pouf' said I had a geometrical head! Well, mamma, you must order me a dress the exact pattern of

yours; the same flounces, the same trimmings, the same ribbons, and I will present myself before the Prince Marshal, the instant he arrives in the ball-room, to receive his accustomed compliment. Perhaps on that occasion he will take me for *you!* Would it not be charming? My whole ambition just now is to be exactly like my mother in every respect!"

As she finished, her eyes insensibly wandered to the picture of the Prince de Chateau-Guerrand, which adorned the boudoir, but falling short of its principal figure, rested on the dead Musketeer in the foreground. The Marquise also happened to be looking at the same object, so that neither observed how the other's gaze was employed, nor guessed that besides figure, manner, features, voice, and gestures, there was yet a stronger point in which they bore too close and fatal a resemblance. Deep in the heart of each lurked the cherished image of a certain Grey Musketeer. The girl draping her idol, as it were, even to herself, not daring so much as to lift a corner of its veil, yet rejoicing unconsciously in its presence, and trusting with a vague, but implicit faith to its protection. The woman alternately prostrating herself at its pedestal, and

spurning it beneath her feet, striving, yielding, hesitating, struggling, losing ground inch by inch, and forced against her judgment, against her will, to love him with a fierce, eager, anxious love, embittered by some of the keenest elements of hate.

These two hearts were formed in the same mould, were of the same blood, were knit together by the fondest and closest of ties, and one must necessarily be torn and bruised, and pierced by the happiness of the other.

It was so far fortunate that neither of them knew the very precarious position in which Captain George found himself placed. Under such a ruler as "The Débonnaire," it was no jesting matter for any man that his name should be written in full on a *lettre de cachet*, formally signed, sealed, and in possession of an ambitious intriguer, who, having no feelings of personal enmity to the victim, would none the less use his power without scruple or remorse. A woman was, of course, at the bottom of the scrape in which Captain George found himself; but it was also to a woman that he was indebted for timely warning of his danger. Madame de Parabére had not only intimated to him that he must make his escape without delay, but had even

offered to sell her jewels that he might be furnished with the means of flight. Such marks of gratitude and generosity were none the less touching that the sacrifice proved unnecessary. A Musketeer was seldom overburdened with ready money, but our Captain of the Grey Company not only bore a Scottish surname, he had also a cross of Scottish blood in his veins. The first helped him to get money, the second enabled him to keep it. Monsieur Las, or Law, as he should properly have been called, like his countrymen, "kept a warm side," as he expressed it, towards any one claiming a connection, however remote, with his native land, and had given Captain George so many usèful hints regarding the purchase and sale of Mississippi stock, that the latter, who was by no means deficient in acuteness, found himself possessed of a good round sum, in lawful notes of the realm, at the moment when such a store was absolutely necessary to his safety.

He laid his plans accordingly with habitual promptitude and caution. He knew enough of these matters to think it improbable he would be publicly arrested while on guard, for in such cases profound secrecy was usually observed, as increasing the suddenness and mystery of the blow. He

had, therefore, several hours to make his preparations, and the messenger whom he at once despatched to prepare relays of horses for him the whole way to the coast was several leagues on his road long before the sun went down. A valise, well packed, containing a change of raiment, rested on the loins of his best horse, ready saddled, with pistols in holsters and bridle hanging on the stall-post, to be put on directly he was fed. Soon after dark, this trusty animal was to be led to a particular spot, not far from the Hôtel Montmirail, and there walked gently to and fro in waiting for his master. By daybreak next morning, the Musketeer hoped to be half-way across Picardy.

Having made his dispositions for retreat like a true soldier, he divested his mind of further anxiety as to his own personal safety, and turned all his attention to a subject that was now seldom absent from his thoughts. It weighed on his heart like lead, to reflect how soon he must be parted from Cerise, how remote was the chance of their ever meeting again. In his life of action and adventure he had indeed learned to believe that for a brave man nothing was impossible, but he could not conceal from himself that it might be years before he could return to France, and his igno-

rance in what manner he could have offended the Regent only made his course the more difficult, his future the more gloomy and uncertain. On one matter he was decided. If it cost him liberty or life he would see the girl he loved once more, assure her of his unalterable affection, and so satisfy the great desire that had grown lately into a necessity of his very being.

So it fell out that he was thinking of Cerise, while Cerise, with her eyes on the Musketeer in the picture, was thinking of him; the Marquise believing the while that her child's whole heart was fixed on her ball-dress for the coming gaieties at the Tuileries. With the mother's thoughts we will not interfere, inasmuch as, whatever their nature, the fixed expression of her countenance denoted that she was keeping them down with a strong hand.

The two had been silent longer than either of them would have allowed, when Célandine entered with a note—observing as she presented it to her mistress, "Mademoiselle is pale; mademoiselle looks fatigued; madame takes her too much into society for one so young; she had better go to bed at once, a long sleep will bring back the colour to her cheeks."

The Marquise laughed at her old servant's carefulness. "You would like to put her to bed as you used when she was a baby. Who brought this?" she added, with a start, as, turning the note in her hand, she observed the royal arms of the Body-guard emblazoned on its seal; bending her head over it the while to conceal the crimson that rose to her very temples.

What a wild gush of happiness filled her heart while she read on—her warm wilful heart, that sent tears of sheer pleasure to her eyes so that she could scarcely decipher the words, and that beat so loud, she hardly heard Célandine's disapproving accents in reply.

"The fiercest soldier, and the ugliest I have yet set eyes on. Nine feet high at least, and the rudest manners I ever encountered, even in a Musketeer!"

Cerise was no longer to be pitied for want of colour, but Célandine, though she observed the change, took no notice of it, only urging on her young lady the propriety of going immediately to bed.

Meanwhile, the Marquise read her note again. It was not (what letter ever was?) so enchanting on the second perusal as the first.

It ran thus:—

"MADAME,

"I am distressed beyond measure to trouble a lady with a question of military discipline. I cannot sufficiently regret that my duty compels me to post a sentry in the grounds of the Hôtel Montmirail. In order that this inconvenient arrangement may interfere as little as possible with the privacy of madame, I urgently request, as the greatest favour, that she will indicate by her commands the exact spot on which she will permit one of my Musketeers to be stationed, and I will be at madame's orders at the usual time of going my rounds to-night. I have the honour to remain, with assurances of the most distinguished consideration, the humblest of madame's humble servants.

"(Signed) GEORGE,

"Captain Grey Musketeers of the King."

It was a polite document enough, and obviously the merest affair of military arrangement, yet the Marquise, after a third perusal, kept it crumpled up in her hand, and when she thought herself unobserved, hid it away, probably for security, in the bosom of her dress.

"There is no answer, Célandine," said she, with

well-acted calmness, belied by the fixed crimson spot in each cheek. "My darling," she added caressingly, to her daughter, "your old *bonne* is quite right. The sooner you are in bed the better. Good-night, my child. I shall come and see you, as usual, after you are asleep. Ah, Cerise! how I used to miss that nightly visit when you were at the convent. You slept better without it than your mother did, I am sure."

Then, after her daughter left the room, she moved the lamp far back into a recess, and sat down at the open window, pressing both hands against her bosom, as though to restrain the beating of her heart.

How her mind projected itself into the future! What wild, inconceivable, impracticable projects she formed, destroyed, and reconstructed once more! She overleaped probability, possibility, the usages of life, the very lapse of time. At a bound she was walking with him through her woods in Touraine, his own, his very own. They had given up Paris, the Court, ambition, society, everything in the world for each other, and they were so happy! so happy! Cerise, herself, and *him*. Ah! she felt now the capabilities she had for goodness. She knew what she could be with a man

like that—a man whom she could respect as well as love. She almost felt the pressure of his arm, while his kind, brave face looked down into her own, under just such a moon as that rising even now through the trees above the guard-house. Then she came back to her boudoir in the Hôtel Montmirail, and the consciousness, the triumphant consciousness, that come what might, she must at least see him and hear his voice within an hour; but recalling the masked ball at the Opera House the night before, she trembled and turned pale, thinking she would never dare to look him in the face again.

There was yet another subject of anxiety. The Prince-Marshal was to come, as he often did of an evening, and pass half an hour over a cup of coffee before he retired to rest. It made her angry to think of her old admirer, as if she did indeed already belong to some one else. How long that some one seemed in coming, and yet she had not sat there, hot and cold by turns, for five minutes yet, unless her clock had stopped.

Suddenly, with a great start, she sprang from her chair, and listened, upright, with parted lips and hair put back. No! her ear was not deceived! It had caught the clink of spurs, and a faint measured footfall, outside in the distant street.

CHAPTER XX.

A GENERAL RENDEZVOUS.

MEANWHILE Cerise, not the least sleepy, though sent prematurely to bed, dismissed her attendant, protesting vehemently, and sat herself down also at an open window, to breathe the night air, look at the moon, and dream, wide-awake, on such subjects as arise most readily in young ladies' minds when they find themselves alone with their own thoughts in the summer evening. However exalted these may have been, they can scarcely have soared to the actual romance of which she was an unconscious heroine, or foreseen the drama of action and sentiment she was about to witness in person. Little did she imagine, while she leaned a sweet face, pale and serene in the moon-

light, on an arm half hidden in the wealth of her unbound hair, that two men were watching every movement who could have kissed the very ground she trod on; for one of whom she was the type of all that seemed best and loveliest in woman, teaching him to look from earth to heaven; for the other, an angel of light, pure and holy in herself, yet luring him irresistibly down the path to hell.

The latter had been hidden since dusk, that he might but see her shadow cross the windows of the gallery, one by one, when she sought her chamber; the other was visiting his guard two hours earlier than usual, with a silent caution that seemed mistrustful of their vigilance, in order that he might offer her the heart of an honest man, ere he fled for his life to take refuge in another land.

Captain George, entering the garden through a private door, could see plainly enough the figure of Mademoiselle de Montmirail brought into relief by the lamp-light in her room. She must have heard his step in the street, he thought, for she had risen and was looking earnestly out into the darkness; but from some cause or another, at the instant the door in the garden wall closed behind him, she shrank back and disappeared.

His heart beat high. Could she have expected

him? Could she know intuitively why he was there to-night? Was it possible she would run down and grant him a meeting in the garden? The thought was rapture! Yet perhaps with all its intoxication, he scarcely loved her so dearly as he had done a moment before, as he did a moment after, when he actually distinguished a white dress flitting along the terrace at the farthest corner of the building.

Then indeed he forgot duty, danger, exile, uncertainty, the future, the past, everything but the intense happiness of that moment. He was conscious of the massive trees, the deep shadows, the black clusters of shrubs, the dusky outlines of the huge indistinct building traversed here and there by a broad shimmer of light, the stars above his head, the crescent moon, the faint whisper of leaves, the drowsy perfume of flowers, but only because of *her* presence who turned the whole to a glimpse of fairyland. He stole towards the terrace, treading softly, keeping carefully in the shadow of the trees. So intent was he, and so cautious, that he never observed Cerise return to her post of observation.

She had resumed it, however, at the very moment when the Musketeer, having advanced some ten

paces with the crouching stealthy gait of a Red Indian, drawing on his game, stopped short like the savage, when he has gone a step too far—rigid, motionless, scarcely breathing, every faculty called up *to watch.*

The attention of Mademoiselle de Montmirail was aroused at the same moment by the same cause.

It is scarcely necessary to observe that the Duke of Orleans, Regent of France, was no less ambitious of distinction in the fields of love than of war. That in the one, though falling far short of his heroic ancestor, whom he so wished to resemble, his prowess was not below the average, scandal itself must admit, but that, if experience ought to count for anything, his encounters in the other should have made him the most successful campaigner of his time, history cannot conscientiously deny.

Like all such freebooters, however, he met with many a bitter reverse, many a signal defeat never mentioned in despatches. His rebuffs, we may be sure, were written on water, though his triumphs were carved in stone; and it was for those on whom he could make least impression that he cherished the greatest interest. The way to captivate the Regent was not so much to *profess*, as to

entertain a thorough contempt for his character, an utter disregard of his position. The noble mind, the stout heart, the strong will, the sagacious, deep-thinking, yet open disposition, true type of manhood, is to be won by love; but the sensualist, the coward, the false, the wicked and the weak, are all best tamed by scorn. With a new face, the Regent was captivated, as a matter of course, for an hour or two; seldom during a whole day; though on occasion, if the face were very beautiful, and strictly guarded, he besieged its owner for a week; but Madame de Montmirail was the only long-established beauty of the Court who had seriously captivated his fancy, and, indeed, what little was left of his miserable self-indulgent heart. This triumph she owed to her perfect unconsciousness of it, and complete disregard for her admirer, therefore it became more firmly established day by day; and when Malletort, who thoroughly comprehended the nature he wished to rule, hinted that his kinswoman was not insensible to the Prince's merits, he did but blow into flame a fire that had been smouldering longer than even he was aware.

Now the Abbé had sufficient confidence in her powers and her attractions to be sure that if Madame de Montmirail once obtained an acknowledged and

ostensible influence over the Regent she would become the virtual ruler of France ; and the Abbé, in his own way, loved his cousin better than anything but the excitement of ambition and the possession of political power. He believed that her disgrace would be of infinite advantage to herself as well as to him, and thought he could see her way clearly, with his own assistance, to an eventual throne. He was a man without religion, without principle, without honour, without even the common sympathies of humanity. It is difficult in our days to conceive such a character, though they were common enough in France during the last century ; but in his views for his cousin, evil as they were, he seemed at least honest—more, self-sacrificing, since she was the only creature on earth for whom he cared.

With his knowledge of her disposition, he did not conceal from himself that great difficulties attended his task. However lightly the cynical Abbé might esteem a woman's virtue, his experience taught him not to underrate the obstinacy of a woman's pride. That his cousin, in common with her family, possessed an abundance of the latter quality, he was well aware, and he played his game accordingly. It was his design to compro-

mise her by a *coup-de-main*, after he had sapped her defences to the utmost by the arguments of ambition and self-interest. Like all worldly men in their dealings with women, he undervalued both her strength and her weakness—her aversion to the Regent, and her fancy for the Musketeer; this even while he made use of the latter to overcome the former sentiment. If she could be induced by any means, however fraudulent, to grant the Prince an interview at night in her own gardens, he argued, that first step would have been taken, which it is always so difficult to retract; and to bring this about, he had forged Captain George's signature to the polite note which had proved so effectual in luring the Marquise down the terrace steps, and across the velvet lawn, under the irresistible temptation of a meeting by moonlight with the man she loved. As a measure of mere politeness, connected with certain military precautions, of course!

But under such circumstances it would appear that *one* Musketeer ought to be company enough for *one* lady at a time. Cerise, viewing the performances from her window above, might have come to the conclusion, had she not been too anxious, agitated, terrified, to retain full possession

of her faculties, that the arrival of a few more of these guardsmen on such a scene, at such a crisis, was conducive rather to tumult and bloodshed than appropriate conversation.

Captain George, stopping short in his eager though stealthy advance towards the white figure flitting noiselessly across the lawn, first thought he was dreaming ; next, that he beheld a spectral or illusive image of himself, denoting near approach of death ; lastly, that the discipline of the corps had become relaxed to a degree which his military indignation resolved should be severely visited within an hour, though he abandoned his command the next.

A Grey Musketeer, hatted, cloaked, booted precisely like himself, was advancing from the direction of the guard-house towards the white figure, that now stopped short as if expecting him. While yet a few feet apart, both stood still, and Captain George, in dark shadow at ten paces distance, not only recognised the Marquise by her voice, but saw her face distinctly, as she turned it towards the moonlight, framed in its masses of black hair.

His heart beat calmly now, and he was the cool resolute man of action once more.

She was the first to speak, and though they trembled a little, very soft and musical fell her tones on the listener's ear.

"I received monsieur's note. It was most kind and considerate on his part. I have been expecting him for this hour past."

The cloaked figure uncovered. George, watching Madame de Montmirail, observed her start and raise her head defiantly.

"Madame will forgive the intrusion then," said her companion, "since it is not unexpected. She will consider also the temptation, and the discretion of her visitor."

There was no mistaking the tones of the Regent, good-humoured, easy, and though a little husky, pleasant as if mellowed by Bourdeaux. She drew back hastily, but the speaker at the same time possessed himself of her hand, almost by force, and drawing her towards him, whispered in her ear.

The Marquise broke from him furiously. Her eyes glittered like steel, and she stamped upon the turf, while she exclaimed—

"What have I ever done that your Highness should offer me this insult? And here, in the midst of my own people! The Montmirails have been always loyal," she added, in a tone of bitter

scorn, "and know how to spare a Bourbon! Quit the garden instantly by that door, and your Highness shall suffer no further humiliation for an act that is at once a folly and an impertinence."

She extended her white hand with the gesture of one who orders a disobedient hound to kennel, and Captain George, in his hiding-place, felt the blood mounting to his brain. But the Regent was not so easily discouraged. Clasping both her hands in his own, he knelt at her feet, and while cloak and hat fell off, proceeded to pour out a stream of professions, promises, and protestations, with a good-humoured carelessness that was in itself an outrage.

Nevertheless, though she struggled fiercely to get free, cool, courageous, and self-possessed, she made no outcry, but in her efforts a bracelet flew from her arm, and the skirt of her muslin dress was torn to its hem.

Captain George could stand it no longer. In two strides he was upon him, hovering over the aggressor with his drawn sword.

Then the Regent's nerve failed. Shaken, excited, irritated, he suspected a plot; he shrank from assassination, he imagined himself surrounded.

"Help! help!" he shouted loudly, staggering to his feet, and looking wildly about him. "To me! my Musketeers! to me! Down with them! fire on them all! The traitors! the assassins!"

Lights twinkled in the hôtel, and servants came rushing out in great alarm, but long ere they could reach the scene of action, half a dozen Musketeers had arrived, with Bras-de-Fer at their head.

"Why, 'tis the Captain!" exclaimed the latter, stopping short with his point lowered, in sheer bewilderment—a lack of promptitude that probably saved his officer's life.

"Arrest him, I tell you, idiots!" shrieked the Regent, with a horrible oath, trembling and glaring about him for a fresh enemy.

The Marquise had plenty of courage. Still she was but a woman, and not actually hemmed in a corner; so, when the Musketeers ran in with levelled weapons, she turned and fled, only as far as the terrace steps however, where she took up her post, and watched the sequel with a wild fixed face, white and stony as the balustrades themselves.

The servants hovered round; chattering, flinching, and doing nothing.

Half a dozen blades flashed in Captain George's

eyes; as many points were levelled at his heart. His own men had been bid to take him, and they must obey. He knew well they were some of the best swordsmen in the French army; but his good horse should by this time be waiting in the street beyond, and if he could fight his way to the garden gate, there was yet a chance left.

Even in this extremity he was conscious that the light still streamed from Cerise's window. Catching a couple of thrusts in his cloak, and engaged with a third adversary, he was aware of Bras-de-Fer's tall figure advancing upon him. For an instant his heart sank, and he felt he was overmatched.

But an unexpected auxiliary, who seemed to have risen out of the very ground, stood at his side. With a thrill of triumph he recognised Beaudésir's voice in his ear.

"Courage, my Captain!" said the professional coolly, as if giving a lesson. "Carte and counter-carte—carte and counter-carte! Keep the wrist going like a windmill, and we shall fight through them all."

He was yet speaking, when Bras-de-Fer went down with an ugly thrust through the lower ribs, exclaiming as he lost his footing—

"*Peste!* Had I known *you* were in it, I'd have parried *your* blade with a pistol-shot!"

A few flashing passes, a clink of rapiers, an oath or two, a shriek from up-stairs, shouts, groans, a scuffling of feet, and George was safe through the garden door and out on the street. He looked for Beaudésir: the youth had disappeared. He looked for his horse: the good beast was walking quietly off in the custody of two Musketeers. A patrol of the same corps were entering the street from the other end. It seemed hard to be taken here after all.

But, once more to-night, Captain George found a friend where he least expected one. A coach was drawn up within six paces. A lackey, with a lighted torch in one hand, held the door open with the other. Old Chateau-Guerrand caught him by the arm.

"You are a brave lad," said he, "and, Regent or *roué*, I am not going to turn my back on my aide-de-camp! I watched you from the roof of my coach over the wall. By the cross of St. Louis, I never saw so good a fight, and I have had fifty years of it, my boy. Here! take my carriage. They dare not stop *that* at their barriers. Those English horses can go like the wind: bid them carry you where you will."

George pressed his hand, and whispered in his ear.

"Relays!" exclaimed the Prince-Marshal. "Then you are safe. Shut him in! And you, coachman, be off! Drive as if you had the devil or old Turenne in your rear!"

It was about this moment that Célandine, rushing into her young lady's room to comfort her, in the alarm, found Cerise extended, motionless and unconscious, on the floor.

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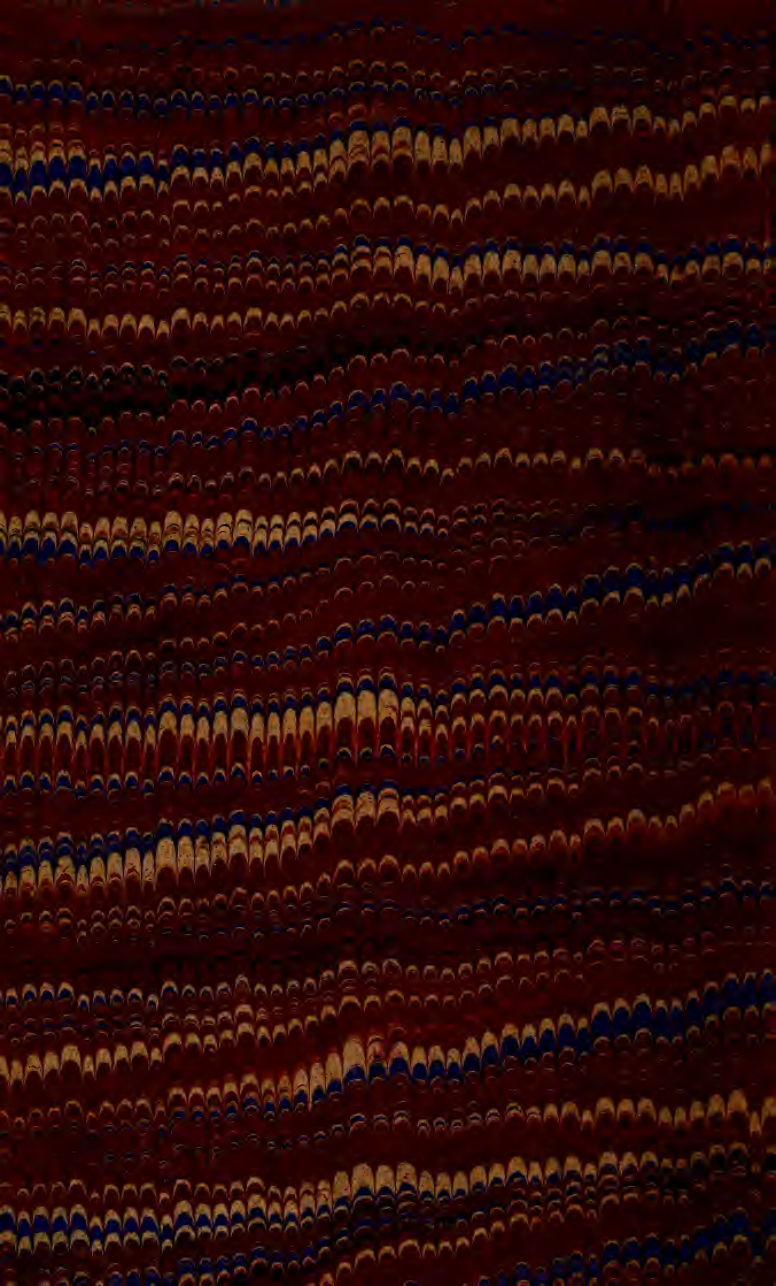

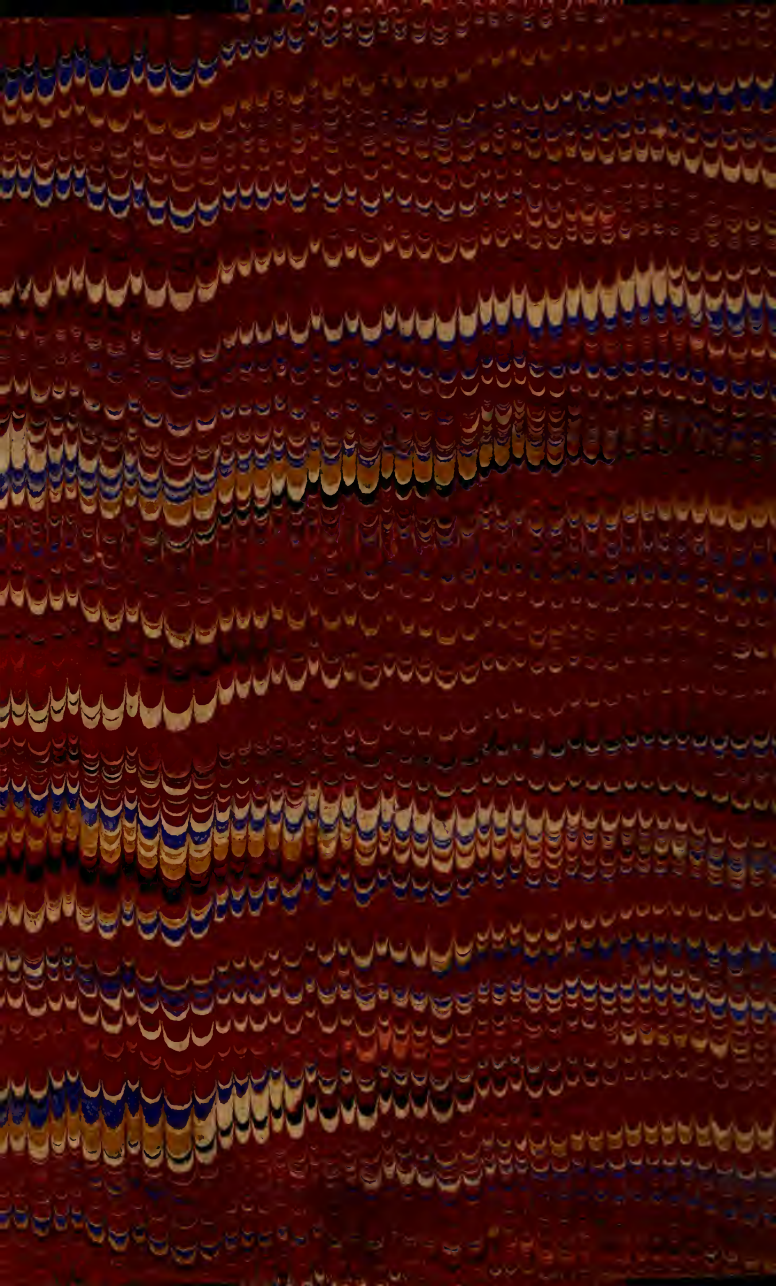

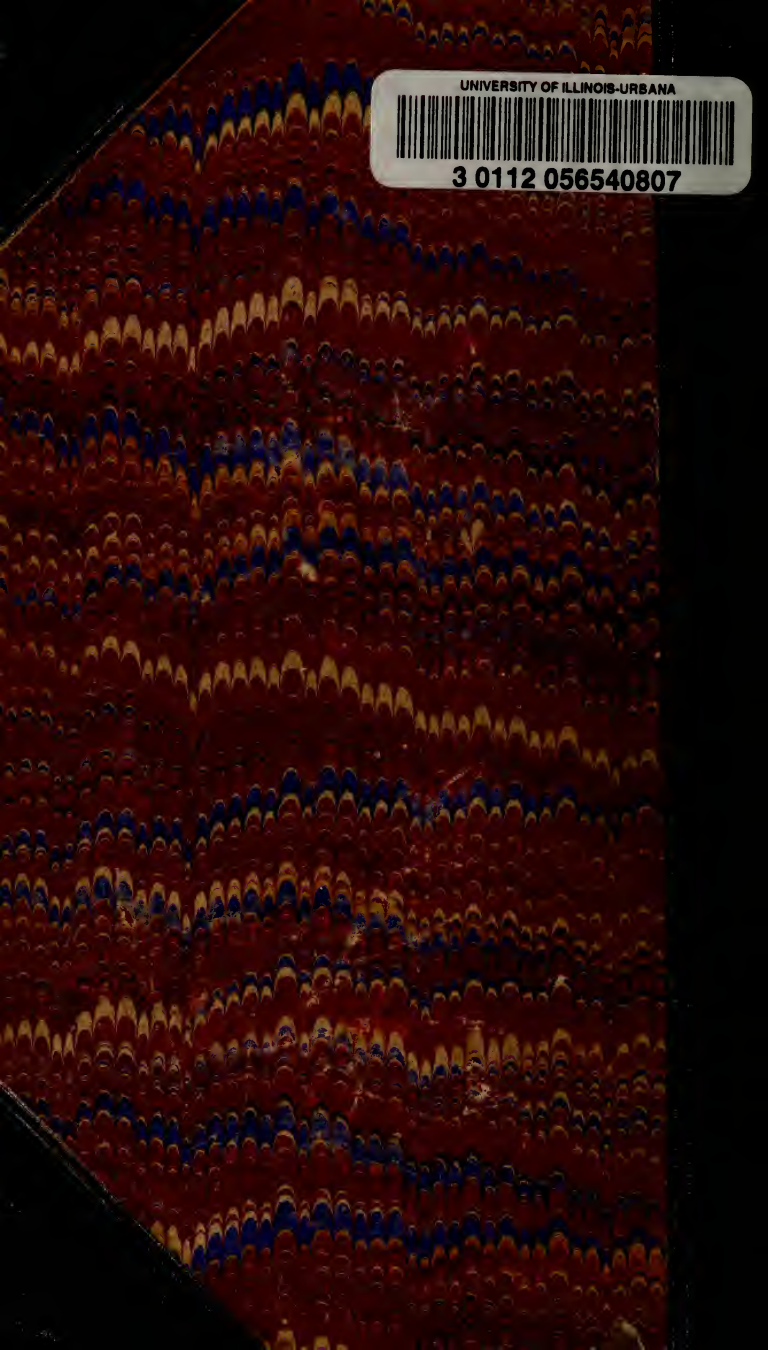
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